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Road from *TOBRUK*

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SOME FIGHTING MEN ARE BORN WITH THE QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP, OTHERS GAIN THEM THROUGH SOUND TRAINING, OTHERS FIND THEM THROUGH FEAR. BUT IN THE STRANGE CASE OF GUNNER HARRY HOPWOOD, IT HAPPENED IN NONE OF THESE WAYS

Chapter 1. *The Death Blow!*

JUNE 1942. THROUGH THE HOSTILE WATERS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN A BRITISH MINESWEEPER WEAVED AN ERRATIC COURSE IN A DESPERATE ATTEMPT TO EVADE THE ATTACKS OF TWO NAZI JUNKERS EIGHTY-EIGHT BOMBERS



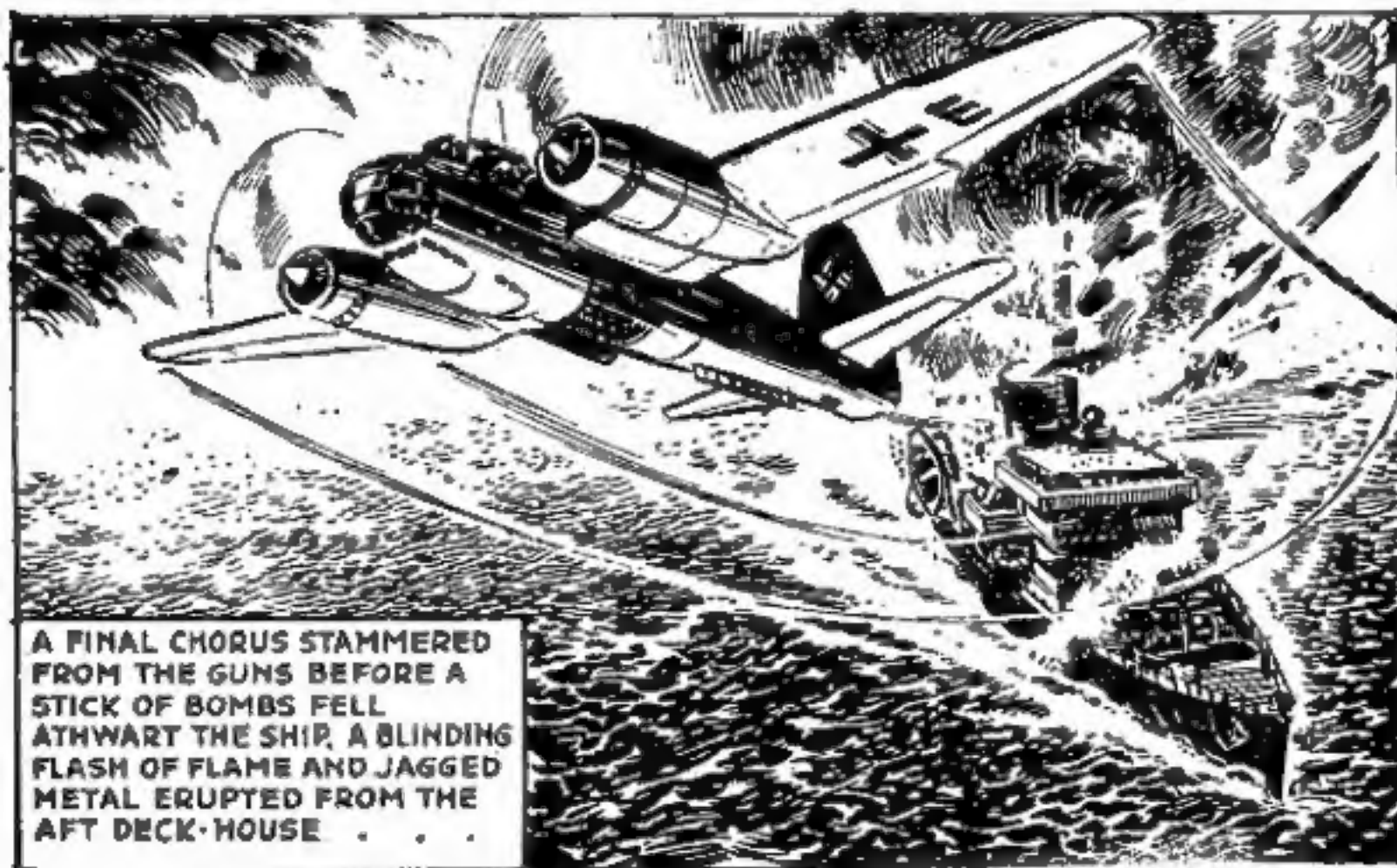
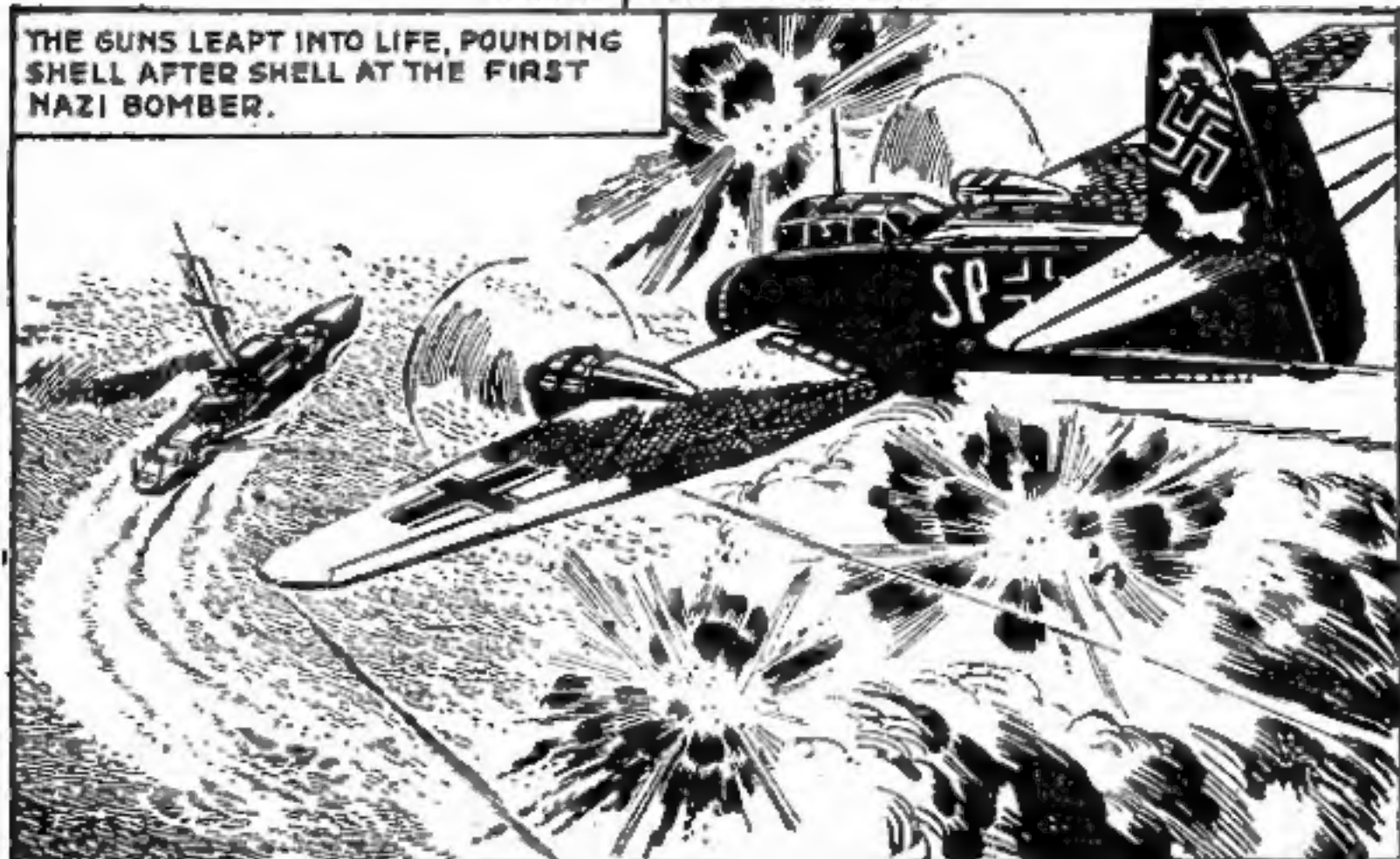
LIKE GREAT BLACK BIRDS OF PREY THE BOMBERS SWEEPED DOWN AGAIN ON THEIR QUARRY. THE SHIP'S OERLIKON GUNNERS HAD NO CHANCE TO REST... THEY WERE THE MINESWEEPER'S SOLE DEFENCE AGAINST AIR ATTACK.

WATCH IT, SCOUSE, THEY'RE COMIN' IN AGAIN!

NEVER GIVE UP, DO THEY, MATE?



THE GUNS LEAPT INTO LIFE, POUNDING SHELL AFTER SHELL AT THE FIRST NAZI BOMBER.



A FINAL CHORUS STAMMERED FROM THE GUNS BEFORE A STICK OF BOMBS FELL ATHWART THE SHIP, A BLINDING FLASH OF FLAME AND JAGGED METAL ERUPTED FROM THE AFT DECK-HOUSE . . .

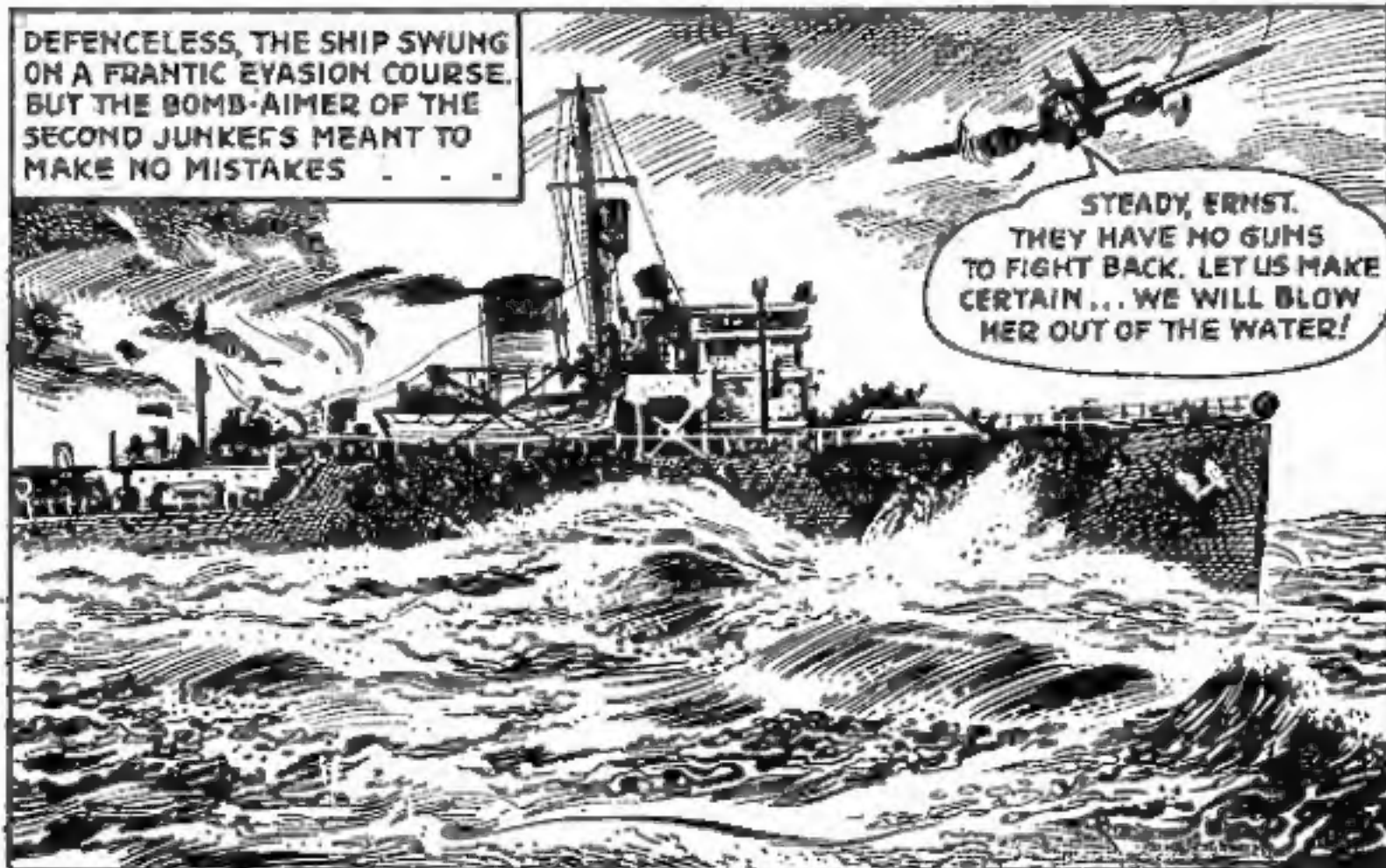
FLUNG OFF HIS FEET BY THE STUNNING FORCE OF THE EXPLOSION, LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER NASH, SKIPPER OF THE MINESWEEPER, FULLED HIMSELF UPRIGHT AND MADE A QUICK ESTIMATE OF THE DAMAGE . . .

DIRECT HIT ON THE OERLIKON, MISTER CLARKE. ALTER COURSE TO ONE-Oh-EIGHT! THAT OTHER PLANE'LL BE ALONG TO FINISH US OFF ANY MOMENT!

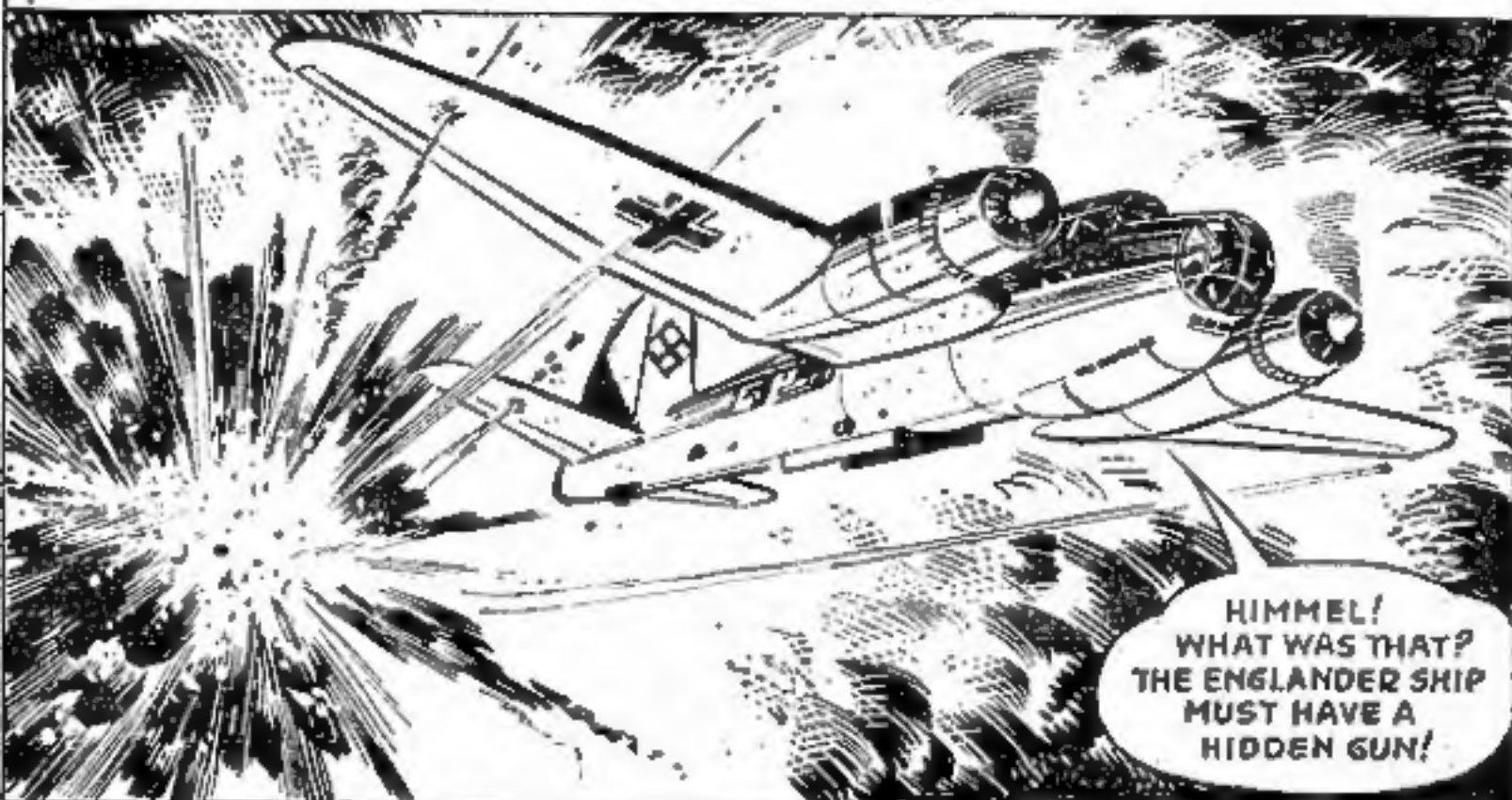


DEFENCELESS, THE SHIP SWUNG ON A FRANTIC EVASION COURSE. BUT THE BOMB-AIMER OF THE SECOND JUNKER'S MEANT TO MAKE NO MISTAKES . . .

STEADY, ERNST. THEY HAVE NO GUNS TO FIGHT BACK. LET US MAKE CERTAIN... WE WILL BLOW HER OUT OF THE WATER!



SUDDENLY, WITH A CRACK THAT RENT THE SKIES, A SHELL BURST CLOSE TO THE NAZI PLANE. SHELL SPLINTERS TORE A RAGGED GASH IN THE BLACK FUSELAGE. IT WAS LIKE A BOLT FROM THE BLUE TO THE GERMAN CREW!



HIMMEL!
WHAT WAS THAT?
THE ENGLANDER SHIP
MUST HAVE A
HIDDEN GUN!


DUMBFOUNDED, THE CREW OF THE MINESWEEPER WATCHED AS THE JUNKERS BANKED SWIFTLY AND MADE OFF



IT
LOOKED LIKE A
SHELL-BURST TO ME,
MISTER CLARKE...


I CAN'T
BELIEVE IT,
SIR...THERE
WAS AN EXPLOSION,
AND NOW THE JERRY'S
SNEERING OFF!

NEXT MOMENT, THE SHIP'S LOOKOUT PROVIDED AN ASTOUNDING ANSWER TO THE RIDDLE OF THE MYSTERIOUS SHELL-BURST . . .



ACK-ACK
GUN DEAD
AHEAD, SIR!

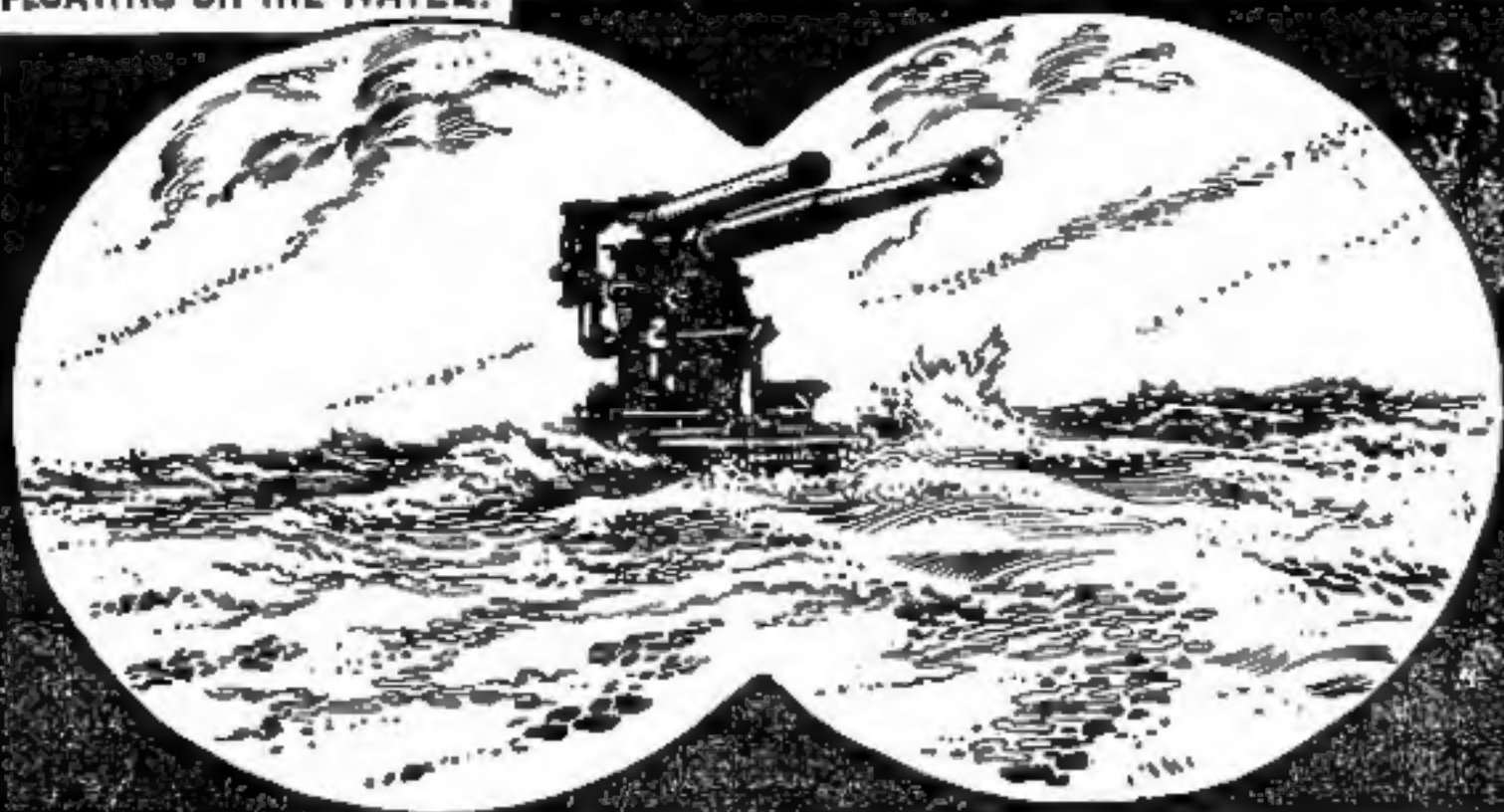
LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER NASH LEVELLED HIS GLASSES AT THE SEEMINGLY EMPTY MILES OF SEA AHEAD OF THE SHIP.



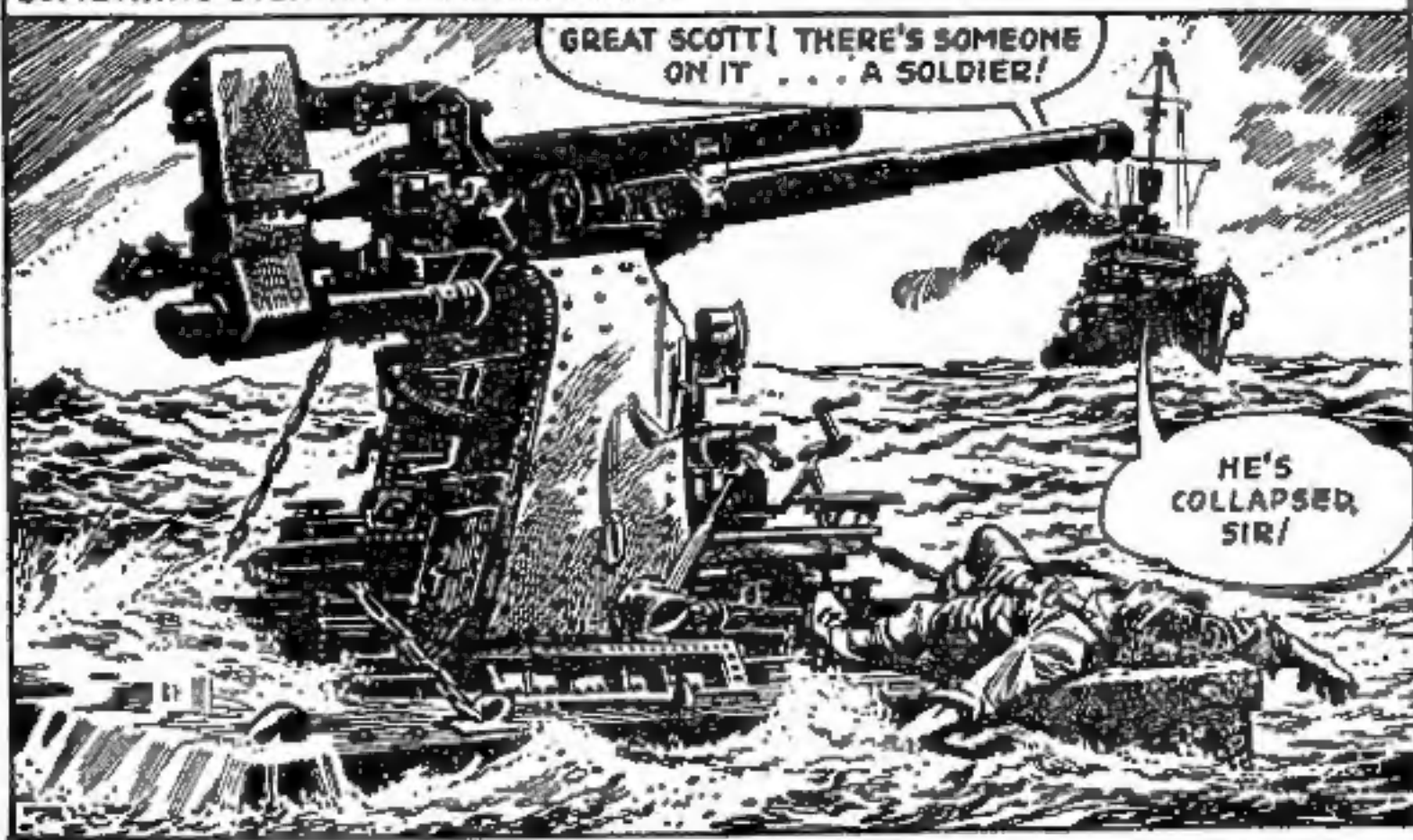
I DON'T
BELIEVE IT!

WE MUST
BE SEEING
THINGS, SIR!

EVEN SO, NEITHER COULD DENY WHAT THEY SAW . . . AN ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUN FLOATING ON THE WATER.



ALTERING COURSE, THE SHIP RACED TOWARDS THE STRANGE OBJECT. NASH SAW THAT THE GUN WAS LASHED TO A COUPLE OF BOOM DEFENCE FLOATS. THEN HE SAW SOMETHING EVEN MORE UNBELIEVABLE



WITH A WEIRD SENSE OF THE UNNATURAL, NASH SWUNG ROUND TO HIS FIRST OFFICER . . .

CAN *HE* HAVE FIRED THAT ROUND? PUT A BOAT OUT, NUMBER ONE.

AYE AYE, SIR!

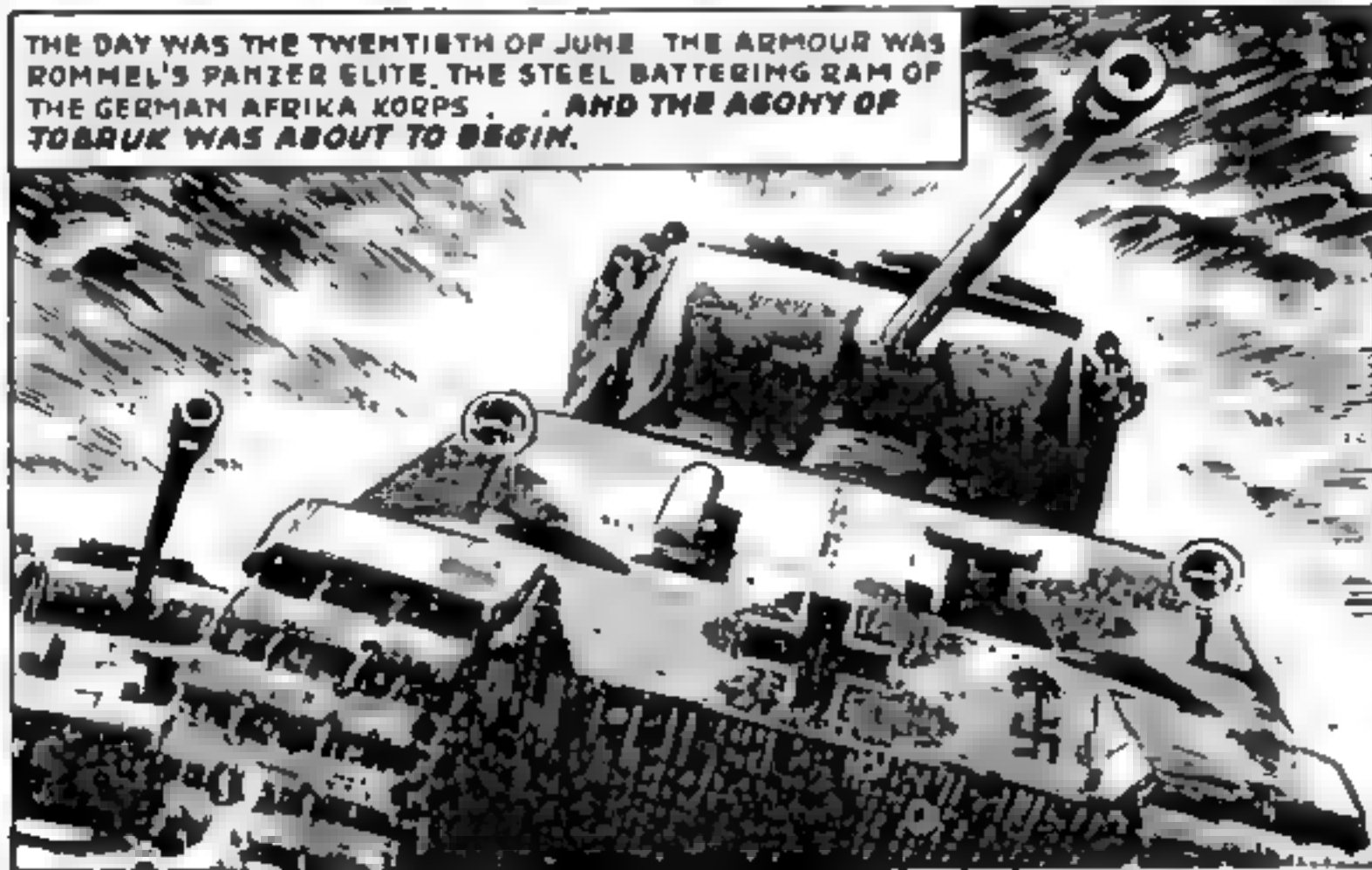
WATCHED BY A SILENT AUDIENCE AT THE MINESWEEPER'S RAILS, THE SHIP'S LONGBOAT CAUTIOUSLY CLOSED WITH THE FLOATING ACK-ACK GUN.

STILL NO MOVEMENT CAME FROM THE LONE, SEA-SOAKED FIGURE AT THE FOOT OF THE GUN. WAS HE DEAD? AND HOW HAD HE EVER COME TO BE IN SUCH A FLIGHT?

TO FIND THE ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS, WE HAVE TO GO BACK SEVEN DAYS. TO A FATEFUL DAWN WHEN A HOST OF LEATHER-JACKETED FIGURES ROSE UP FROM THE EARLY SHADOWS AND CLIMBED INTO THEIR WAITING ARMOUR.



THE DAY WAS THE TWENTIETH OF JUNE. THE ARMOUR WAS ROMMEL'S PANZER ELITE, THE STEEL BATTERING RAM OF THE GERMAN AFRIKA KORPS. . . AND THE AGONY OF TOBRUK WAS ABOUT TO BEGIN.



ALLIED DEFENDERS AT THE PERIMETER WIRES SAW THE DESERT MIST TURN TO A ROSY DAWN. SUDDENLY, WITH SPINE-CHILLING ABRUPTNESS, THE ENEMY APPEARED

TANKS! JERRY
TANKS!

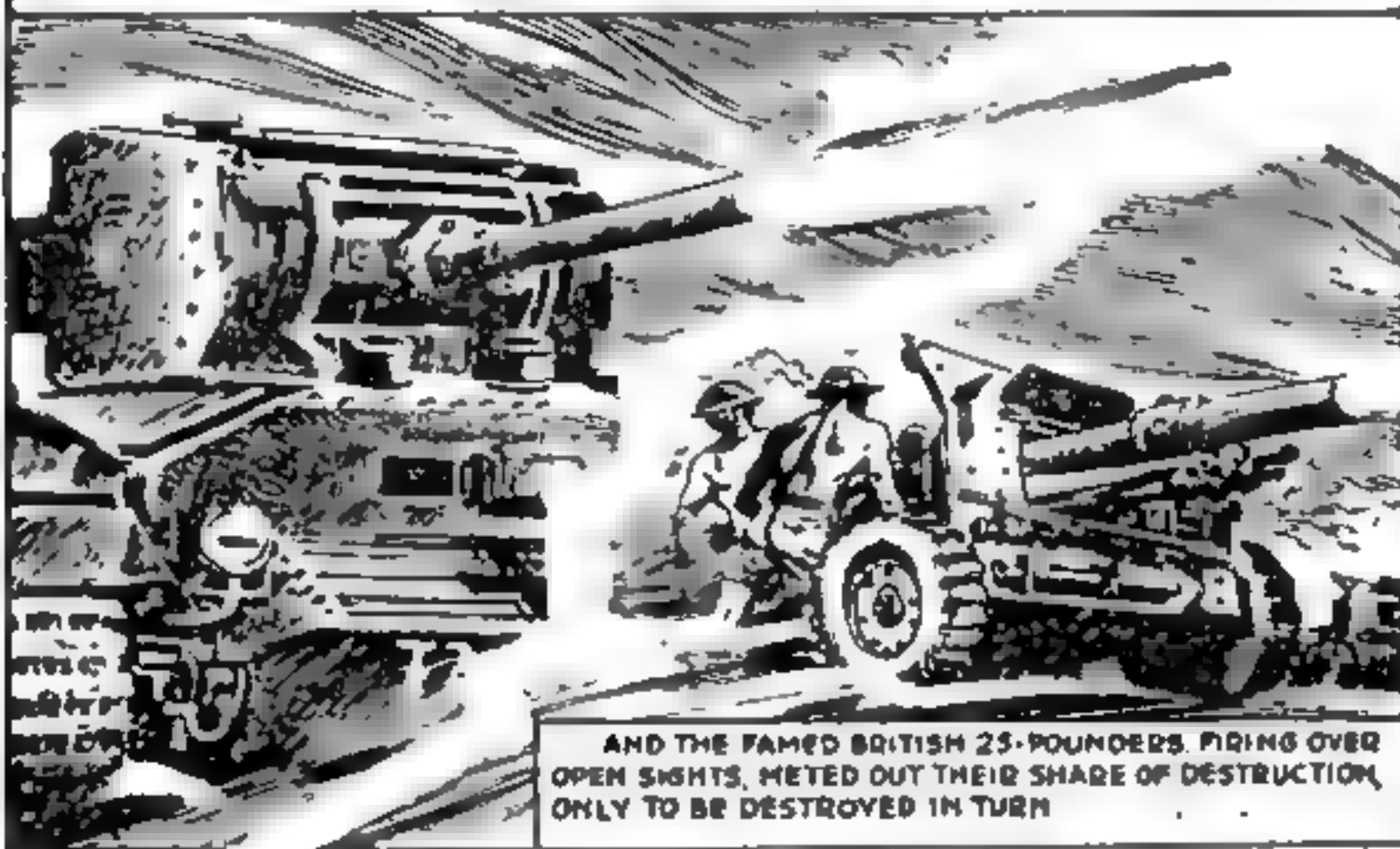


THE SUN CLIMBED, AND WITH IT ROSE THE HEAT, DUST, AND EAR-SPLITTING FURY OF ANOTHER CLASH WITH A FEROCIOUS ENEMY BUT THIS TIME, DISMAY STRUCK AT THE DEFENDERS' GALLANT HEARTS

WE'RE BEING
OVERRUN, SIR!



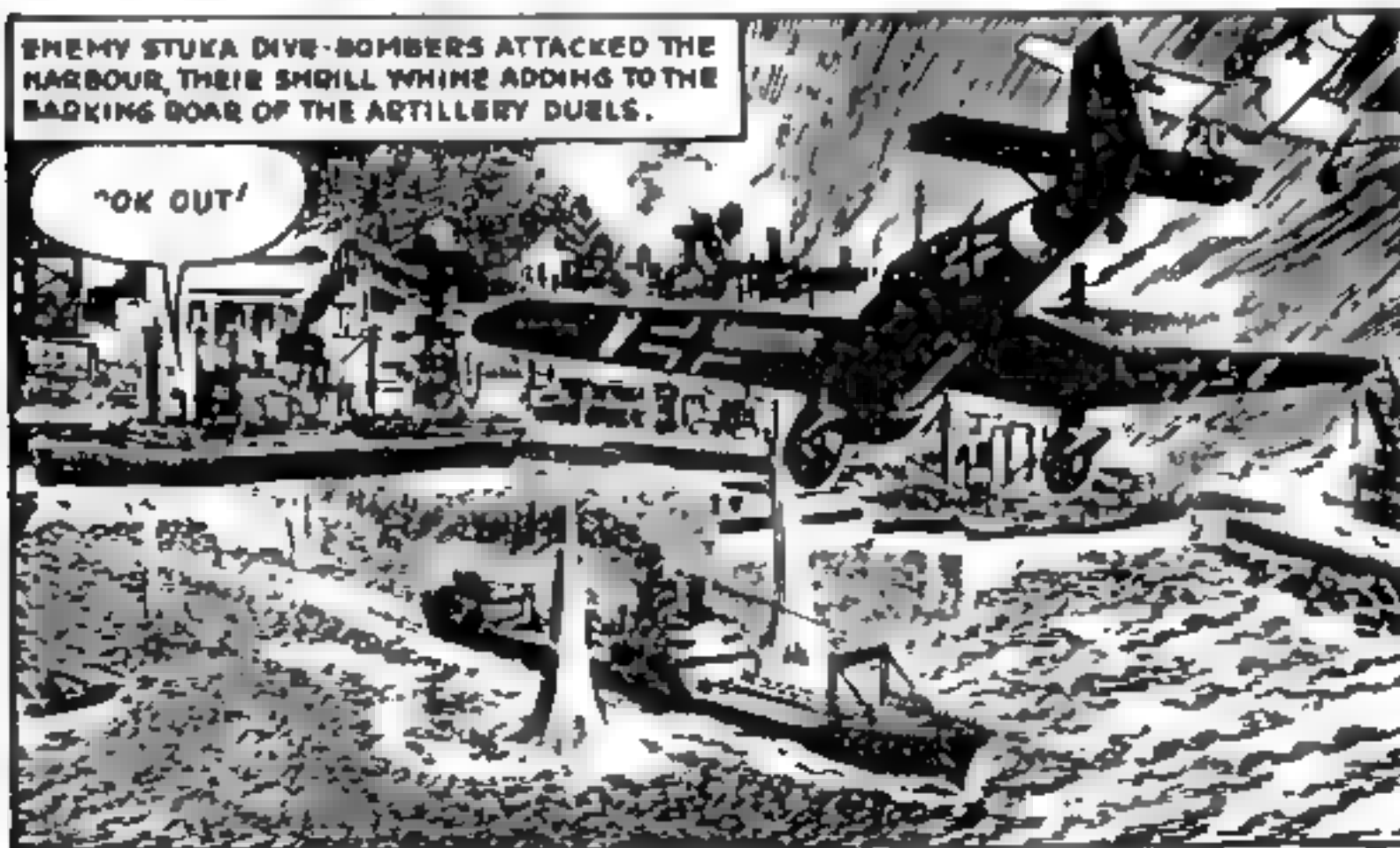
ALLIED TANKS FOUGHT TO STEM THE ENEMY'S SURGING FLOOD OF MEN AND ARMOUR . . .



AND THE FAMED BRITISH 25-POUNDERS, FIRING OVER OPEN SIGHTS, METED OUT THEIR SHARE OF DESTRUCTION, ONLY TO BE DESTROYED IN TURN

ENEMY STUKA DIVE-BOMBERS ATTACKED THE HARBOUR, THEIR SHRIILL WHINE ADDING TO THE BARKING ROAR OF THE ARTILLERY DUELS.

"OK OUT!"



HIS BOMBS SPENT, THE STUKA LEADER TURNED WITH COLD HATRED UPON HIS OLD ENEMIES . . . THE BRITISH ANTI AIRCRAFT GUNS DEFENDING THE HARBOUR



SCORNING THE SHELL BURSTS, THE NAZI PILOT PICKED ON A GUN AT THE PIERHEAD AND DIVED TOWARDS IT. THE GUN'S RING-SIGHT ENCIRCLED THE ONCOMING PLANE THEN



THE PILOT SLUMPED OVER HIS CONTROLS AND THE SHATTERED PLANE SPUN DIZZILY TOWARDS THE WATER



THE PIERHEAD GUN TEAM PAUSED TO STARE WITH BATTLE-HARDENED EYES AT THE SPOT WHERE THEIR FOG HAD HIT THE HARBOUR WATER AND PLUNGED BENEATH THE SURFACE



THE SKY SUDDENLY CLEARED AND THE MEN OF NUMBER THREE GUN TEAM HAD A CHANCE TO RELAX AND KICK ASIDE THE EMPTY SHELL CASES



FROM THE PERIMETER DEFENCES CAME THE RAGGED THUNDER OF GUNS BUT THAT SOUND HAD BEGG'48 FAMILIAR TO THEM.

GUNNER HARRY HOPWOOD BEGAN
CLEANING THE SMOKING BREECH.
"HEFTY" HOPWOOD, THEY JOKINGLY CALLED
THE DIMINUTIVE, EIGHT-STONE-SEVEN
GUNNER . . .



SINCE HE HAD JOINED THE CREW, IT HAD
BEEN HEFTY HOPWOOD'S PASSION TO KEEP
"LUCY," THE GUN, CLEAN AND PIN-BRIGHT. . .



THE OTHERS LOOKED AT HEFTY WITH FAINT
DERISION. NO ONE HAD MUCH TIME FOR HIM
. . . HE KEPT TOO MUCH TO HIMSELF.

MID-MORNING, THE SOUNDS OF BATTLE HAD GROWN OMINOUSLY
LOUDER. SUDDENLY, CAPTAIN SELLERS ARRIVED . . .

KNOCK THESE SANDBAGS DOWN
... YOU'LL BE FIGHTING
TANKS ANY
MINUTE!

COR!



GINGER-HAIRED SERGEANT KELLY CAME UP AT THE DOUBLE, HIS RUGGED FACE EVEN MORE GRANITE LIKE UNDER THE STRESS OF EVENTS

ORDERS COME THROUGH, SIR, TO DESTROY ALL VEHICLES.

NOT US, SERGEANT! IF THINGS GET TIGHT, WE'LL MOVE OUT... HAVE THE TRUCKS READY.



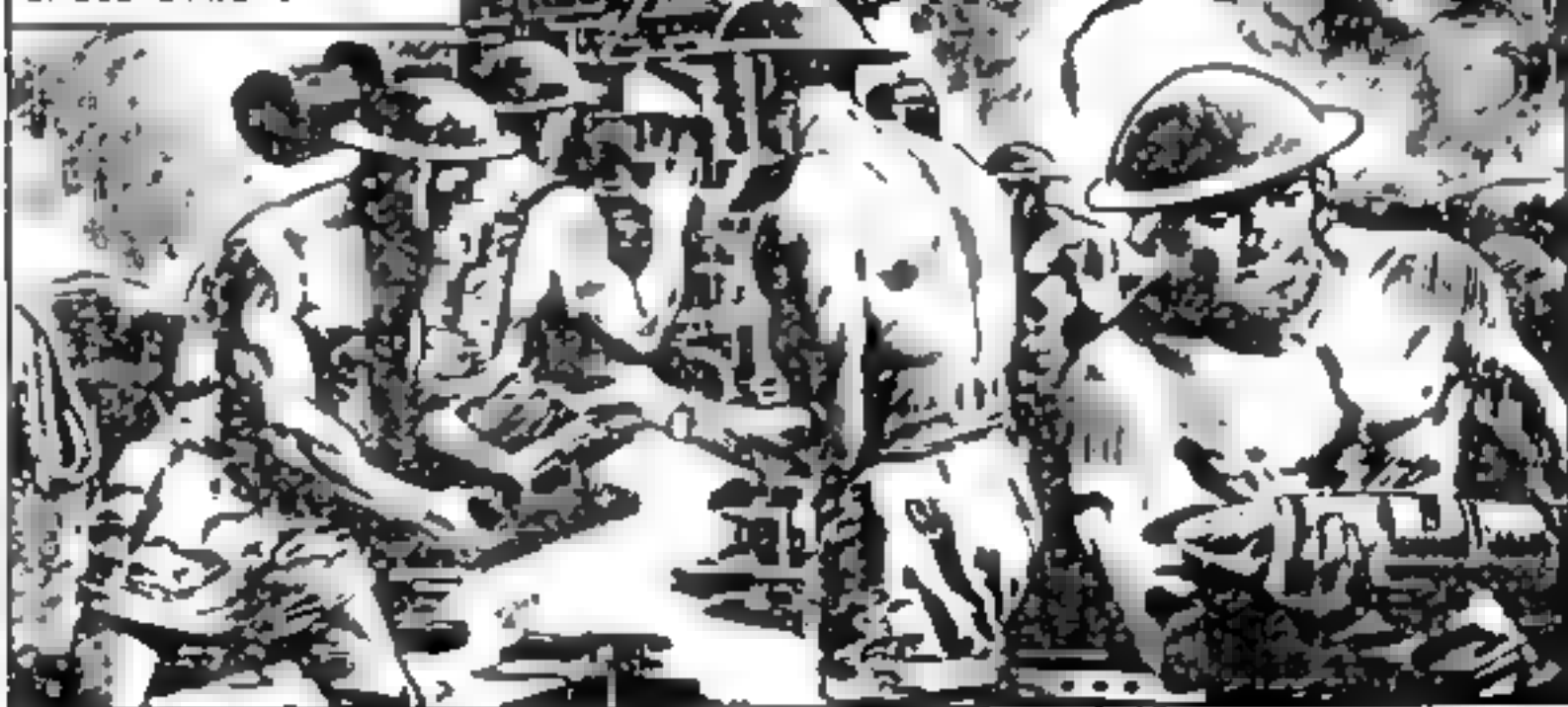
HEFTY HOPWOOD LOOKED AT CAPTAIN SELLERS WITH OPEN ADMIRATION. IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN HIS SECRET, BUT FORLORN AMBITION TO BE ASSERTIVE AND COMMANDING.



NEXT MOMENT, FRESH WAVES OF STUKAS ROARED DOWN UPON THE HARBOUR. ONCE AGAIN, IT WAS THE FEW REMAINING SHIPS, STRUGGLING TO GET CLEAR, THAT SUFFERED

LONG USED TO THIS TYPE OF ATTACK, THE ACK-ACK GUN-TEAMS FED THEIR GUNS WITH CALM PRECISION AND MARKED THE SKY WITH DEADLY SHELL-BURSTS.

LEFT! LEFT!



BUT BY NOON, EVEN THE HARD BOILED TEAM OF NUMBER THREE GUN WERE NOT PREPARED FOR THE SIGHT THAT NOW LOOMED BEFORE THEM . . .

COR JERRY TANKS!



GOOD GRIEF!
IT CAN'T BE!

AT THE WHIPCRACK OF CAPTAIN SELLERS' VOICE, THE GUNNERS LOWERED LUCY'S SLEEK MUZZLE UNTIL IT WAS LEVELLED POINT-BLANK AT THE SANDBAGS . . .



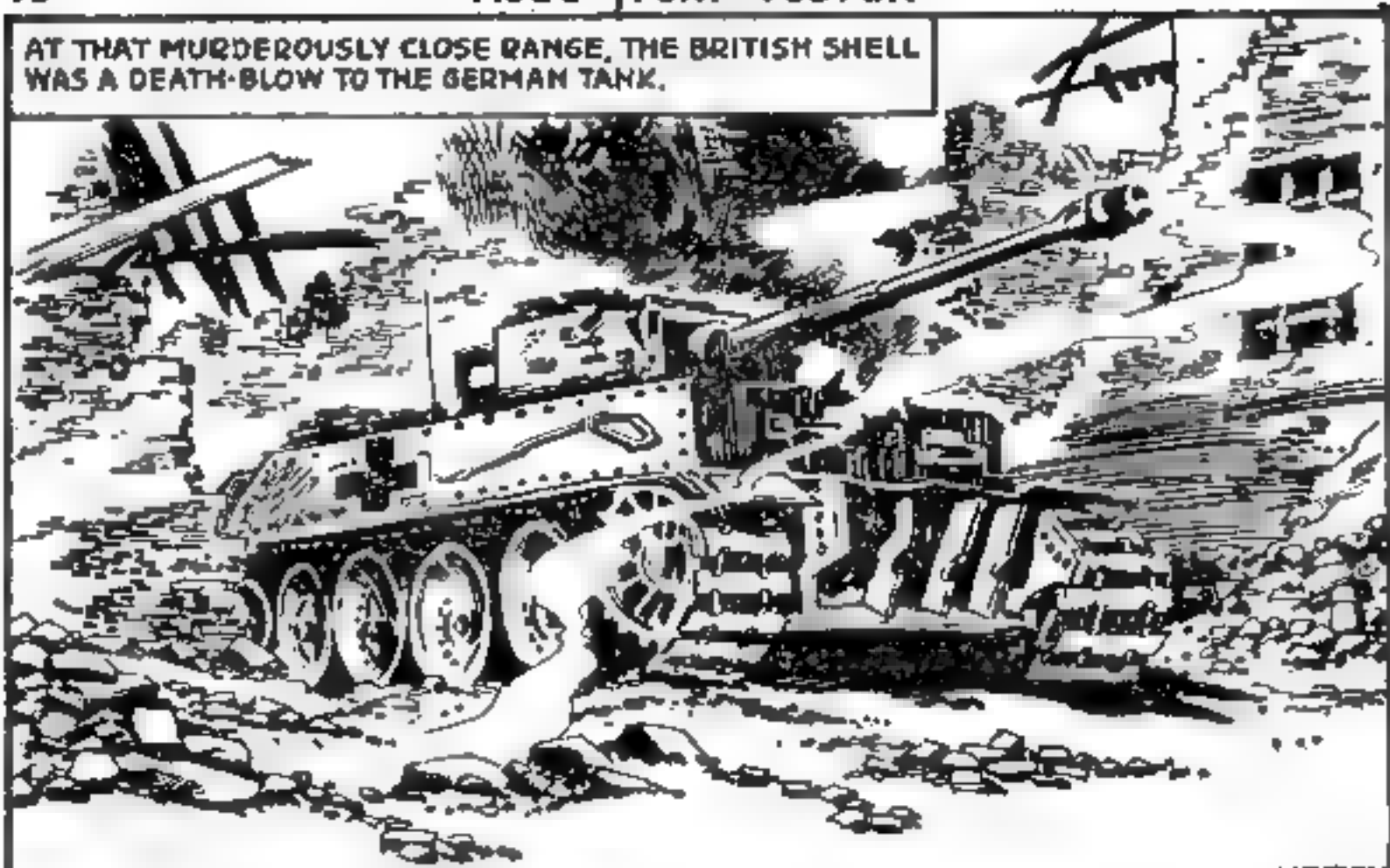
ONE SHELL BLASTED THE SANDBAGS ASIDE IN A WELTER OF FLAME AND SMOKE



NOW LUCY FACED THE LEADING GERMAN TANK . . . BUT THE GERMAN TANK COMMANDER WAS QUICK . . . BOTH GUNS FIRED TOGETHER!



AT THAT MURDEROUSLY CLOSE RANGE, THE BRITISH SHELL WAS A DEATH-BLOW TO THE GERMAN TANK.



BUT WITH ITS FINAL SHOT, THE TANK HAD WREAKED REVENGE UPON THE GUN-CREW. IT WAS HARRY HOPWOOD WHO BROKE THE NEWS TO SERGEANT KELLY . . .

IT'S CAPTAIN SELLERS, SARGE... HE'S IN A BAD WAY.

ALL RIGHT, HOPWOOD... LET'S TAKE A LOOK.



SELLERS WAS UNCONSCIOUS, SO KELLY TOOK OVER COMMAND. EVEN AT THAT DIRE MOMENT, HEFTY HOPWOOD ENVIED THE SERGEANT HIS SELF-RELIANCE . . .

THERE'S A SHIP LEAVING THE QUAY, HOPWOOD, TELL THEM TO WAIT. THEY CAN TAKE CAPTAIN SELLERS ABOARD.

YES, SARGE.



HEFTY ARRIVED PANTING AT THE NEARBY QUAY, WAVING AND SHOUTING FOR ATTENTION.

HI, WAIT...
WAIT!



BUT IN THEIR FRANTIC EFFORTS TO GET CLEAR OF THE BOMB-BLASTED HARBOUR, THE SAILORS WERE NOT IMPRESSED . . . AND HARRY HOPWOOD KNEW IT.

STOP!

TAKE NO NOTICE, HOBBY. IT'S ONLY A PINT-SIZE PONGO.



SHAMEFACED, THE LITTLE GUNNER RETURNED TO STAND DUMBLY MISERABLE, WHILE SERGEANT KELLY'S TONGUE LASHED HIM.

THE SHIP'S GONE?...
OF COURSE IT'S GONE,
IF YOU LET IT!

WELL, I.
I.

BUT HEFTY'S STAMMERING EXCUSES WERE CUT SHORT .

WE'LL HAVE TO LEAVE
THE CAPTAIN AT THE
DRESSING STATION RIGHT .
WE'RE CLEARING OUT
OF THIS HOLE!

Chapter 2. Sands of Anguish

WHILE THE ROAR OF ROMMEL'S ATTACK GREW STEADILY CLOSER, SERGEANT KELLY WORKED LIKE A GIANT TO SAVE WHAT HE COULD OF THE BATTERY. ONLY THREE GUNS REMAINED INTACT BUT HE GOT THEM ON THE MOVE.

LET'S GO!

SOMEHOW THEY FOUND THE BARDIA ROAD, LEADING EAST FROM TOBRUK. WRECKAGE LITTERED THE WAY AND OVERHEAD SCREAMED THE STUKAS. THIS WAS WAR, SAVAGE AND MERCLESS.

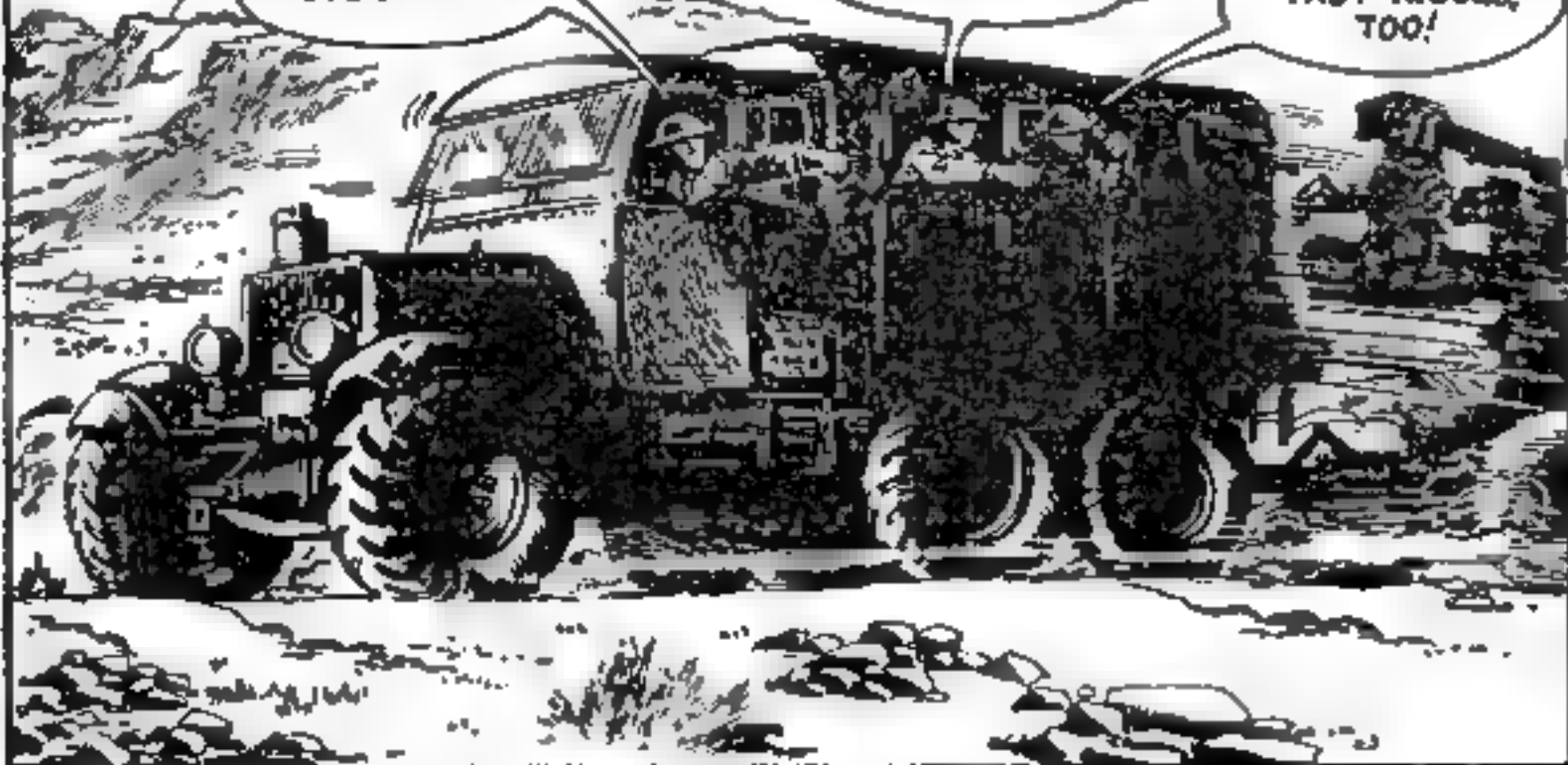
KEEP MOVING!

CRASHING ON WITH THEIR GUNS IN TOW, THEY BURST THROUGH THE OUTER DEFENCES AND SO INTO THE DESERT. ALL SEEMED WELL FOR SOME MILES, UNTIL . . .

LOOK! . . .
OVER THERE!

JERRIES! COMING
THIS WAY!

IN
FAST TRUCKS,
TOO!



WITH THE WHINE OF FOUR GERMAN INFANTRY TRUCKS IN HIS EARS, SERGEANT KELLY KNEW THEY HAD BUT ONE HOPE OF SURVIVING

COME ON, YOU LOT!
WE'LL FIGHT THESE JERRIES
OVER OPEN SIGHTS!
GET CRACKING!



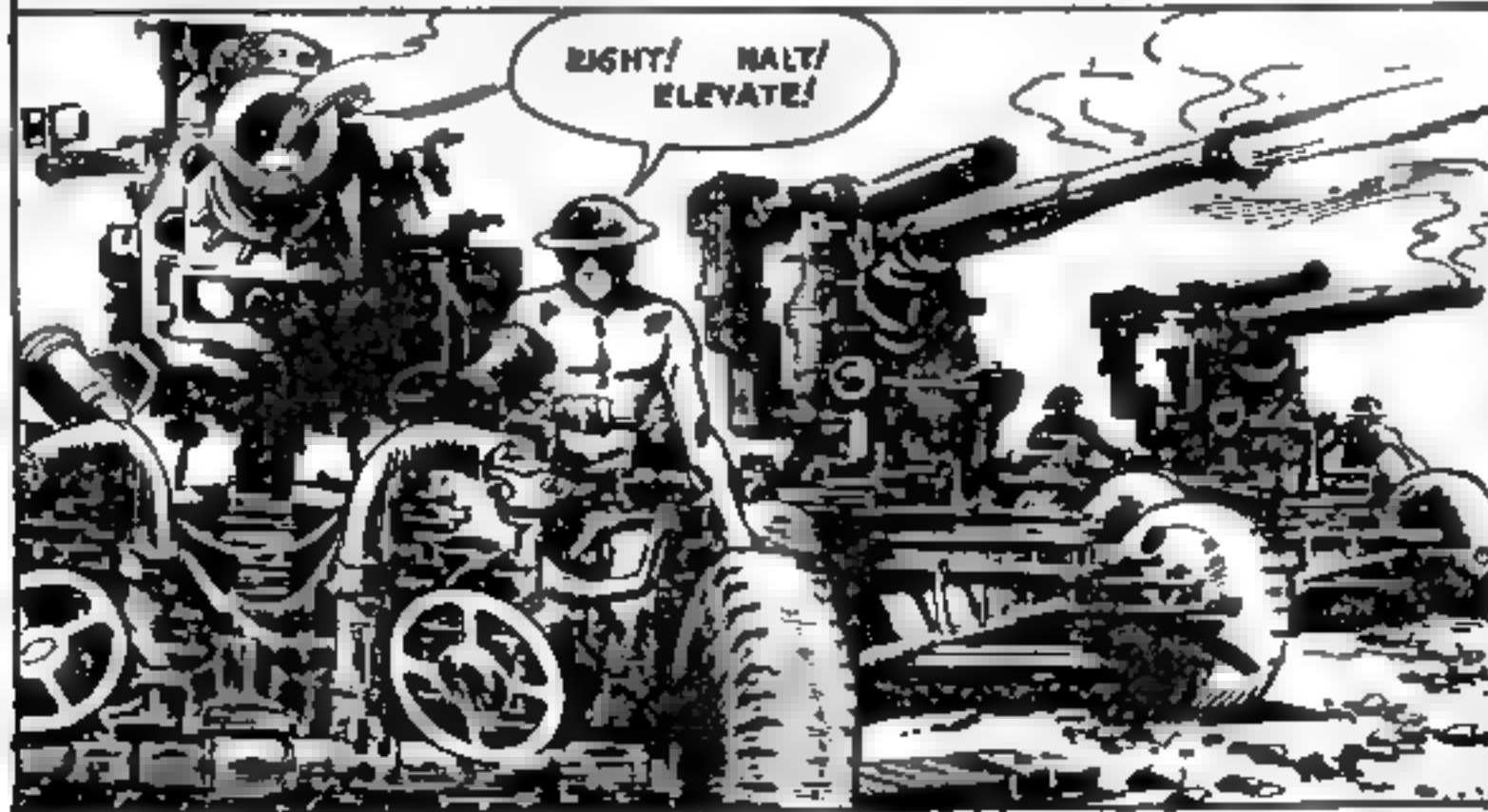
AT LAST THEY WERE READY, PANTING FROM THE EFFORT, THEIR EYES SQUINTING THROUGH THE HEAT HAZE. EVERY GUN BREECH CRADLED A WAITING SHELL . . .

STEADY!



A STENTORIAN ROAD FROM KELLY AND THE FEARFUL BARRAGE BEGAN. HARRY HOPWOOD SAW THE COUGHING SPOUTS OF SAND AS THEIR SHELL-BURSTS CREPT TO MEET THE ONCOMING ENEMY . . .

EIGHT! NALT/
ELEVATE!



Road from Tobruk

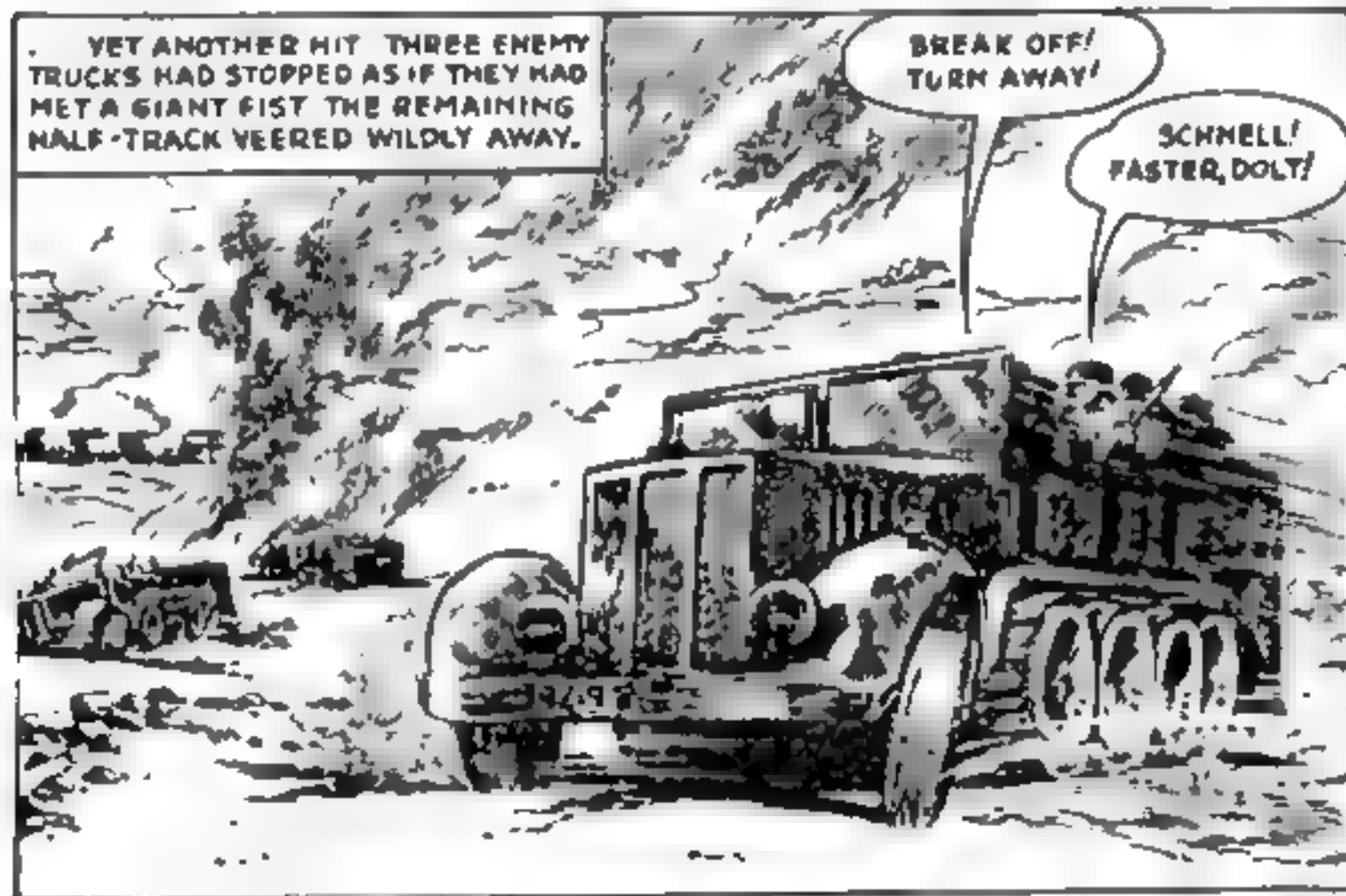
THE THREE BRITISH GUNS FIRED A MURDEROUS SALVO OF HIGH-EXPLOSIVE ONE DIRECT HIT WAS FOLLOWED BY ANOTHER



YET ANOTHER HIT THREE ENEMY TRUCKS HAD STOPPED AS IF THEY HAD MET A GIANT FIST THE REMAINING HALF-TRACK VEERED WILDLY AWAY.

BREAK OFF!
TURN AWAY!

SCHNELL!
FASTER, DOLT!



THE ACTION WAS OVER FOR THE TIME BEING, AND THE EXHAUSTED GUNNERS RESTED . . . ALL EXCEPT CORPORAL ELLIS IN CHARGE OF NUMBER FOUR GUN. HE SEEMED ANXIOUS TO LEAVE . . .

LET'S MOVE
SARGE! THERE MIGHT
BE MORE JERRIES
AROUND!

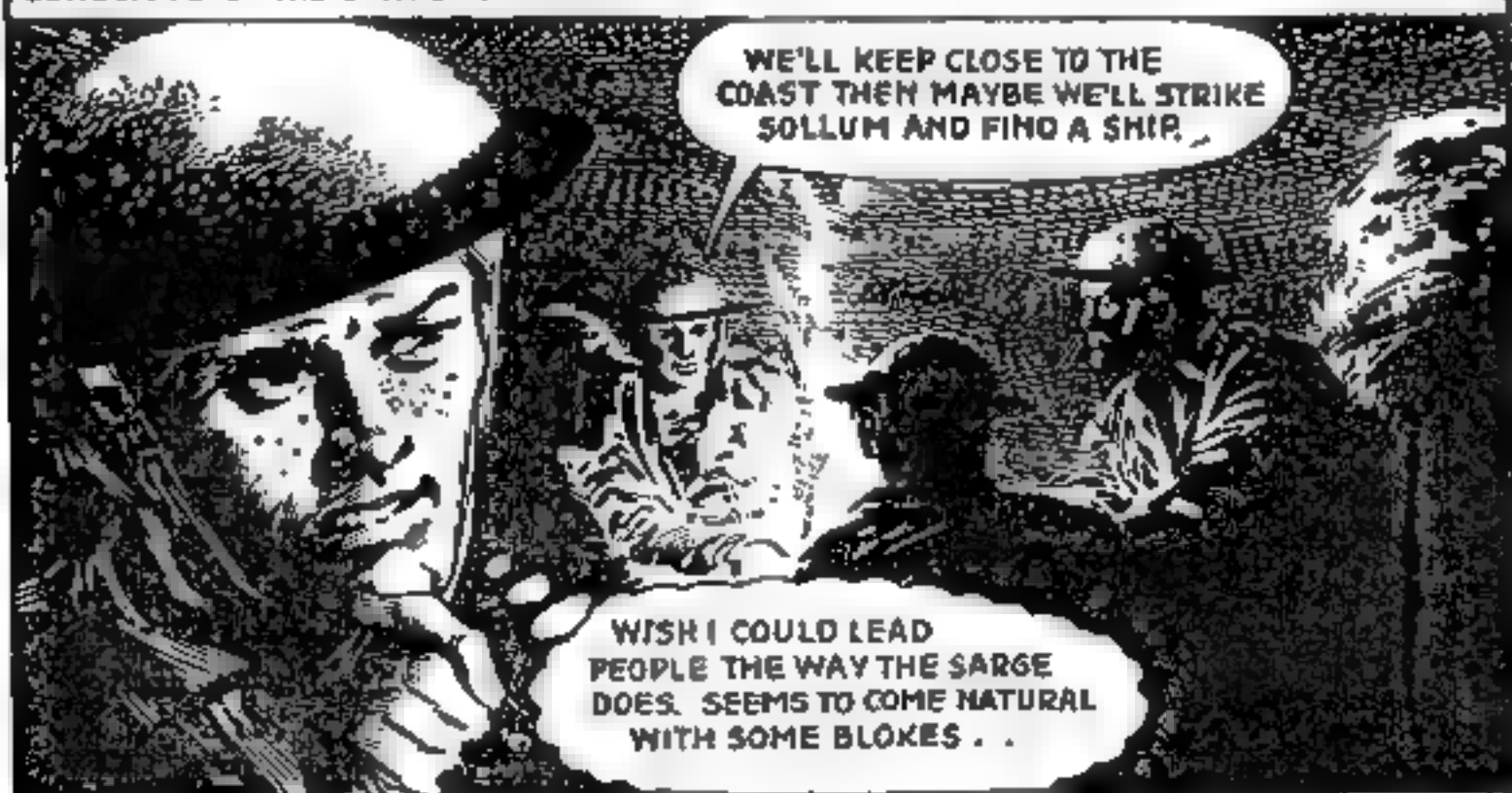


SERGEANT KELLY GAVE THE WORD AND THEY MOVED OFF ONCE MORE. THAT NIGHT, THEY CAMPED IN A PROTECTIVE HOLLOW, WHILE KELLY SIZED THINGS UP

WE'VE THIRTY MEN, THREE GOOD
TRUCKS, FAIR AMMUNITION, LITTLE FOOD
AND EVEN LESS WATER . .
BUT WE'LL GET
THROUGH



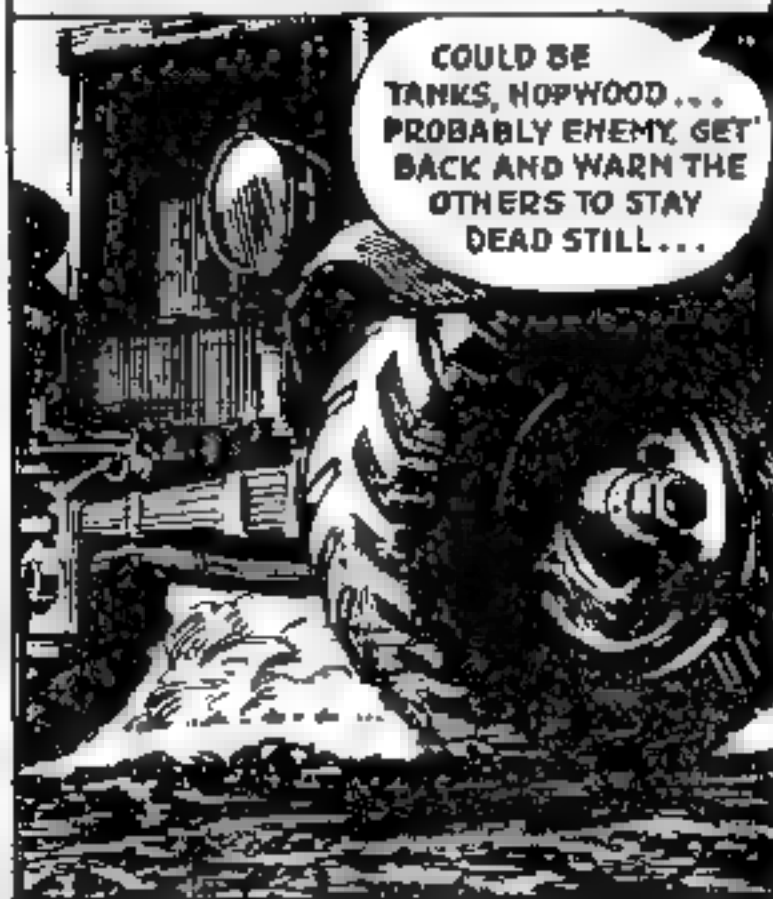
LISTENING TO KELLY'S CRISP DECISIVE TONES ONLY MADE HEFTY HOPWOOD ALL THE MORE CONSCIOUS OF HIS OWN SHORTCOMINGS



BEFORE LIGHT THEY WERE ON THEIR WAY AGAIN. HEFTY SHARED THE CAB OF THE LEADING TRUCK, WITH KELLY DRIVING. BY NOON THE BRASSY SUN BEAT DOWN ONCE MORE



SUDDENLY KELLY BROUGHT HIS TRUCK TO A GRINDING HALT. HIS EYES, SCANNING THE HOSTILE WASTES, HAD CAUGHT THE TELL-TALE DUST OF MOVING VEHICLES.



HEFTY RAN TO THE TRUCK BEHIND, WHERE GUNNER STACKER POKED OUT A WORRIED FACE . . .

SARGE SAYS DON'T MOVE, OR THE JERRIES WILL SPOT OUR DUST TRAILS.

OKAY, BUT SUPPOSE THEY SEE US?

NOT STOPPING TO REPLY, HEFTY MOVED TO THE THIRD TRUCK AND REPEATED THE WARNING. BUT CORPORAL ELLIS SEEMED NOT TO HEAR. HIS EYES WERE SHIFTY WITH FEAR. . .

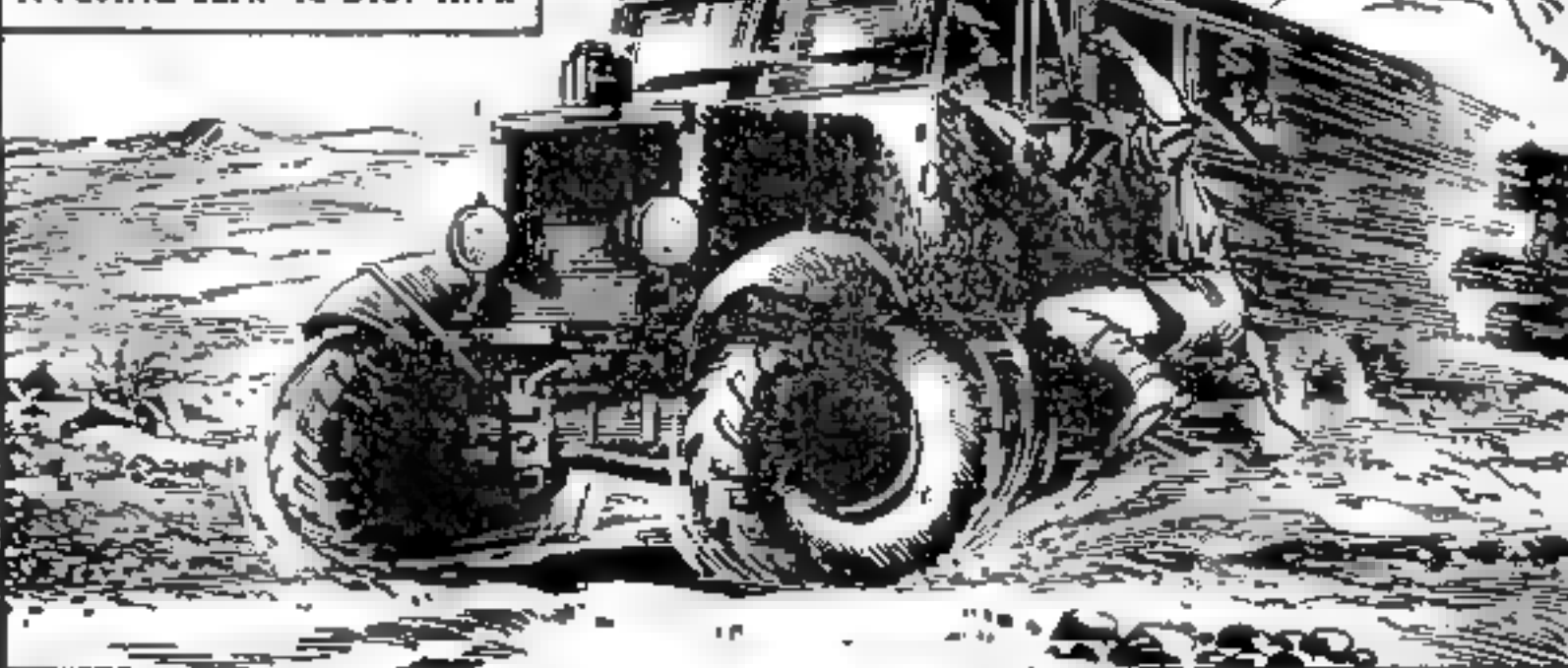
DO YOU HEAR, ELLIS?

ER?

STUNG INTO SUDDEN PANIC, ELLIS RAMMED HOME THE GEAR LEVER AND SWUNG THE TRUCK TO THE RIGHT WITH A FURIOUS SHOUT, HEFTY TOOK A FLYING LEAP TO STOP HIM.

STAY STILL, YOU FOOL!

WHAT THE HECK'S GOING ON?



DOGGEDLY, HEFTY HELD ON. ONCE HE HAD FAILED TO STOP A SHIP IN TOBRUK HARBOUR, AND NOW HE WAS FAILING TO STOP ELLIS


YOU CRAZY?
STOP!

GOADED INTO ACTION, HEFTY MADE A GRAB AT THE WHITE-FACED CORPORAL . . . ONLY TO RECEIVE A STUNNING BLOW.

UGH!

HEFTY FELL ON ROCKY GROUND. HE PULLED HIMSELF WEAKLY TO HIS KNEES, THEN SUDDENLY HEARD THE OMINOUS WHISTLE OF AIRCRAFT AND THE HAMMERING CHATTER OF MACHINE-GUNS.


THAT WAS A
JERRY PLANE
WHERE'S THE
TRUCK?



HEFTY CRAWLED
TO THE RIDGE
AND LOOKED
DOWN . . . TO
GASP IN COLD
HORROR . . .

THE TRUCK!
THAT JERRY
PLANE GOT
IT!

ELLIS AND HIS HAPLESS TEAM
HAD PAID A SHARP PRICE FOR
DISOBEDIENCE. THEIR DUST TRAIL
HAD BROUGHT UPON THEM THE FATE
FROM WHICH THEY HAD FLED.



NOT A MAN MOVED FROM THE FURIOUSLY
BURNING TRUCK. THEN, WITH SHOCK
SUDDENNESS, THE AMMUNITION
EXPLODED!

GOOD
GRIEF!

SICK WITH DESPAIR, HEFTY HOPWOOD RETRACED HIS STEPS TO THE HIGHER GROUND. HE HEARD THE TRUCKS REYVING, AND THE VERY SOUND FILLED HIM WITH FRESH DREAD . . .

THEY'RE MOVING!
KELLY'S MOVING!

HEFTY FORCED HIMSELF INTO A HOBBLING RUN AND, WITH ONLY SECONDS TO SPARE, SCRAMBLED IN BESIDE THE GRIM-FACED KELLY AS THE TRUCK GATHERED SPEED.

IN QUICK, HOPWOOD!
JERRY'S SEEN US!



PITCHED ABOUT IN THE LURCHING CAB, HEFTY EXPLAINED THE FATE OF ELLIS' CREW. IN THE DISTANCE, THE ENEMY FOLLOWED, POISED AS IF MAKING UP THEIR MINDS TO GIVE CHASE.

THEY'RE TANKS
ALL RIGHT! WILL THEY
CATCH US?

THEIR
GUNS COULD!

KELLY HAD BARELY SPOKEN WHEN EXPLODING SHELLS KICKED UP CLOUDS OF SAND IN THEIR PATH. ACCELERATING QUICKLY, THE SERGEANT YELLED AT THE TRUCK BEHIND.

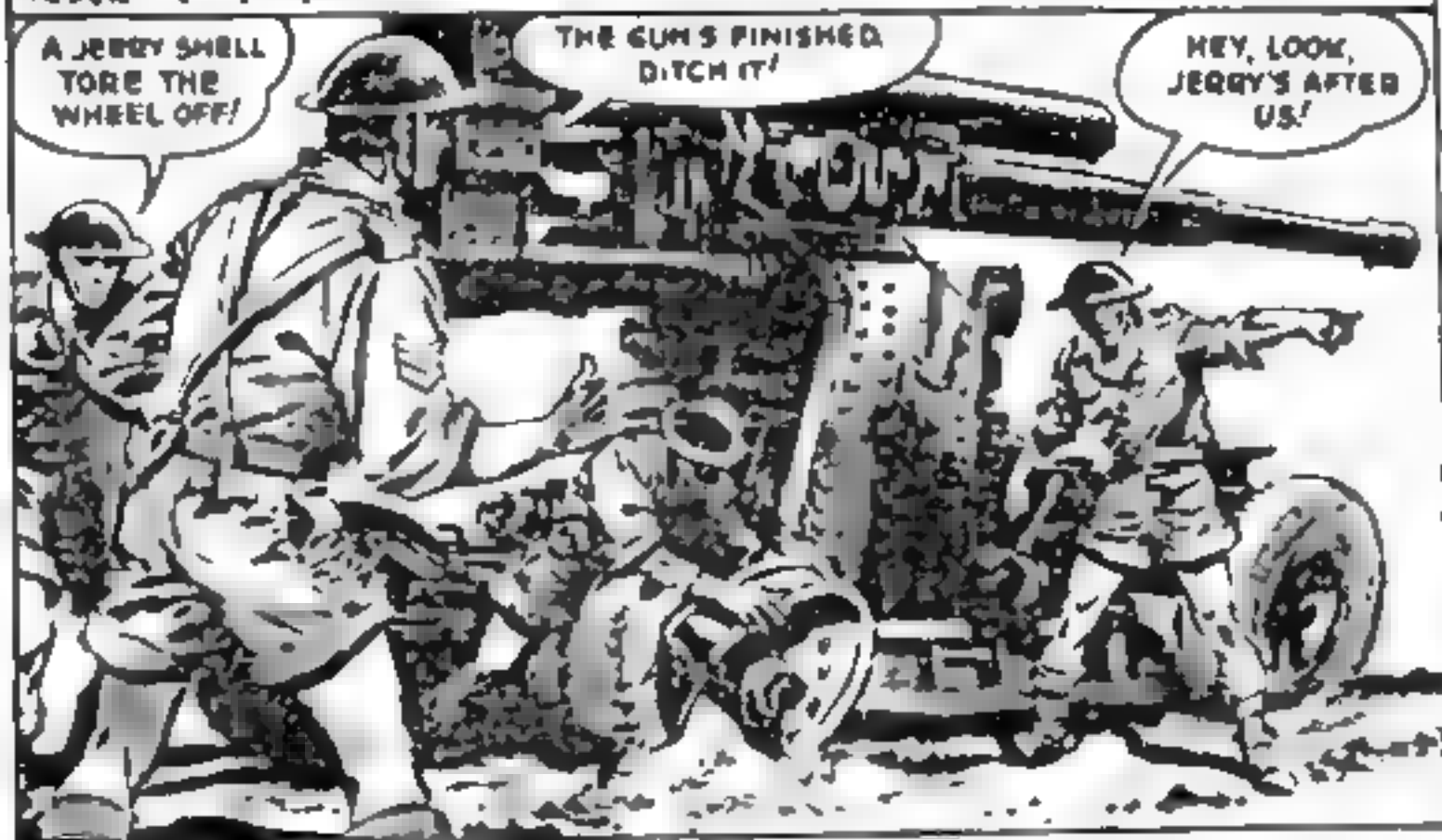
HURRY,
STACKER...
HURRY!

SECONDS LATER, AN EXPLOSION BEHIND MADE HEFTY AND KELLY TURN IN THEIR SEATS . . .

WHAT'S WRONG?

STOP, SARGE!
STACKER'S IN
TROUBLE!

KELLY STAMPED ON THE BRAKES. THEY LEAPT OUT AND RACED BACK TO THE SECOND TRUCK . . .



ENCOURAGED BY THE SIGHT OF A CRIPPLED PREY,
THE GERMAN TANKS MOVED IN FOR THE KILL . . .



FOR THE GUNNERS, IT WAS A MAD SCRAMBLING RACE TO WRENCH THE TOW-BAR FREE. THEN GUNNER STACKER GAVE A YELL . . .



AT LAST IT WAS DONE. THE USELESS GUN FELL FREE BUT NOW THEY COULD PLAINLY HEAR THE GRIND OF THE ENEMY TANK TRACKS. AT KELLY'S HOARSE SHOUT, THE GUNNERS RACED ACROSS THE SAND



HEFTY HEARD THE POUNDING BOOTS AROUND HIM. THEN HE TRIPPED HEADLONG OVER THE BODY OF SERGEANT KELLY, KILLED BY A SHELL SPLINTER.



THERE WAS NO TIME FOR HEROICS. THE SPRINTING GUNNERS HURLED THEMSELVES INTO THEIR TRUCK . . . AND LEFT THE WHEEL TO HEFTY HOPWOOD . . .

QUICK!

GET IN!



HEFTY DROVE AS IF DEATH ITSELF CHASED BEHIND HIM . . .



IN TIME, THE CAREERING MILES PUT THEM BEYOND PURSUIT . . . BUT NEVER BEYOND THE BLACK REALISATION THAT THEY WERE LEADERLESS. THE FEARLESS KELLY WAS GONE.



SUDDENLY, THE VAST SUN BAKED DESERT LOOKED BLEAK, OMINOUS . . .

THEY CAMPED THAT NIGHT IN WORDLESS PESSIMISM BY THE MISTY-WET DAWN THEY WERE A BEARDED, GAUNT-EYED BUNCH, TEASED BY THIRST AND SULLEN WITH PRAYED NERVES.



BUT THERE WAS ONE DECISION WHICH
GAVE THEM NO STRAIN . . .

THE GUN
MUST GO.

IT'S ONLY
A LUMBER!

WHAT?

HEFTY HOPWOOD WAS AGHAST. ALL HIS
NATURAL SHYNESS BURST INTO SPLUTTERING
INDIGNATION

L...LEAVE THE GUN?
LEAVE LUCY? YOU'RE
CRAZY! WITHOUT HER WE'D
BE COMPLETELY
DEFENCELESS!

FACING THE SCOWLING GUNNERS, HEFTY WAS SURPRISED AT HIS OWN BOLDNESS. IT WAS NOT LIKE HIM TO ARGUE.

LUCY'S OUR ONLY PROTECTION. WE'VE GOT TO KEEP HER

HEFTY DID NOT KNOW IT BUT OUT OF HIS PROTECTIVE DEVOTION TO THE GUN WAS EMERGING THE VERY QUALITY HE PRIZED SO HIGHLY . . . SELF-ASSERTION . . .

TO THE LITTLE GUNNER'S ASTONISHMENT, THE MEN GAVE IN. THEY SHRUGGED THEIR SHOULDERS AND PREPARED TO LEAVE. HEFTY STARED UNBELIEVINGLY . . .

STONE THE CROWS . . . THEY'RE DOING AS I SAID!

STILL MARVELLING AT HIS OWN BOLDNESS, HEFTY TOOK THE WHEEL. BEHIND HIM RUMBLED THE GUN WHICH SEEMED TO EXERT SUCH A COMPELLING INFLUENCE ON HIM . . .

THEY LEFT ME TO DRIVE. THAT MEANS THE DECISIONS ARE UP TO ME!



THEIR DIRECTION LAY VAGUELY EASTWARD. SOMEWHERE OVER THAT BURNING ~~HEATH~~ OF SAND LAY THE PORT OF SOLLUM . . . AND MAYBE A SHIP. BUT ILL-LUCK STILL DOGGED THEM . . . THE SECOND TRUCK SPLUTTERED AND STOPPED . . .

IT'S
SEDIMENT
IN THE PETROL
FEED.

WE'RE GETTING NEAR
THE BOTTOM OF
THE TANK, TOO.

WE'LL
NEVER MAKE
IT TO
SOLLUM.



FOR TWO HOURS THE GUNNERS TOILED UNDER THE BLAZING SUN TO CLEAR THE PETROL FEED. WHEN THE JOB WAS DONE THEY SLUMPED EXHAUSTED TO THE GROUND. IT WAS HEFTY WHO GOT THEM MOVING AGAIN...

WE'D STAND
A BETTER CHANCE
CUTTING NORTH...
MAYBE WE'LL STRIKE
SOME OTHER PORT
SOONER.



NO-ONE SAID A WORD. THEY HAD LEFT IT TO HEFTY TO MAKE THE DECISIONS . . .

COR... WHAT
A TURN-UP/
THEY'RE TREATING
ME AS IF I'M
THE BOSS!



Chapter 3. *Shock Tactics*

THAT NIGHT, THEY SLEPT BY THEIR TRUCKS IN A DEEP-5 DED WADI. IN THE MORNING, THEY WOKE TO SIT UP AND STARE IN HORROR AND DISMAY.



THERE, AT THE LIP OF THE WADI, STOOD A GERMAN SCOUT CAR. THE ENEMY CREW STARED DOWN AT THEM, MOTIONLESS AND SILENT.

HOW LONG HAVE THEY BEEN THERE?

WHY DON'T THEY SHOOT?



AS THOUGH FEARFUL OF BREAKING THE WORDLESS SPELL, THE GUNNERS ROSE SLOWLY TO THEIR FEET ONLY HEFTY HOPWOOD WAS RACKING HIS WITS...



WITH A COOLNESS THAT SURPRISED HIMSELF, HEFTY TOOK IN THE WHOLE SITUATION... PARTICULARLY THE POSITION OF THE ENEMY SCOUT CAR IN RELATION TO THE GUN.



AS THE LONG, STRAINED MINUTES WORE ON, THE GROWING LIGHT REVEALED THE THREE NAZI SOLDIERS WATCHING THE BRITISH, NO DOUBT BALANCING THEIR CHANCES OF CAPTURING THE GUNNERS BEFORE THE GUN COULD BE BROUGHT INTO ACTION.



IT WAS OBVIOUS TO THE GUNNERS THAT AT ANY TIME THE GERMANS MIGHT CLIMB BACK IN THEIR CAR AND COME RACING IN FOR THE KILL. THEN HEFTY SLOWLY CLIMBED ON TO THE GUN . . .

LUCY'S
OUR ONE
HOPE



PICKING UP AN OILY RAG, HEFTY MADE A PLAY OF GUN-CLEANING, BUT ALL THE WHILE HIS EYE WAS TAKING IN ANGLES . . .

DEPRESSION'S
OKAY . . . IF
ONLY WE COULD
SWING LUCY
ROUND
A FEW
FEET.

SEEING GUNNER STACKER FROM THE CORNER OF HIS EYE, HEFTY SPOKE UNDER HIS BREATH

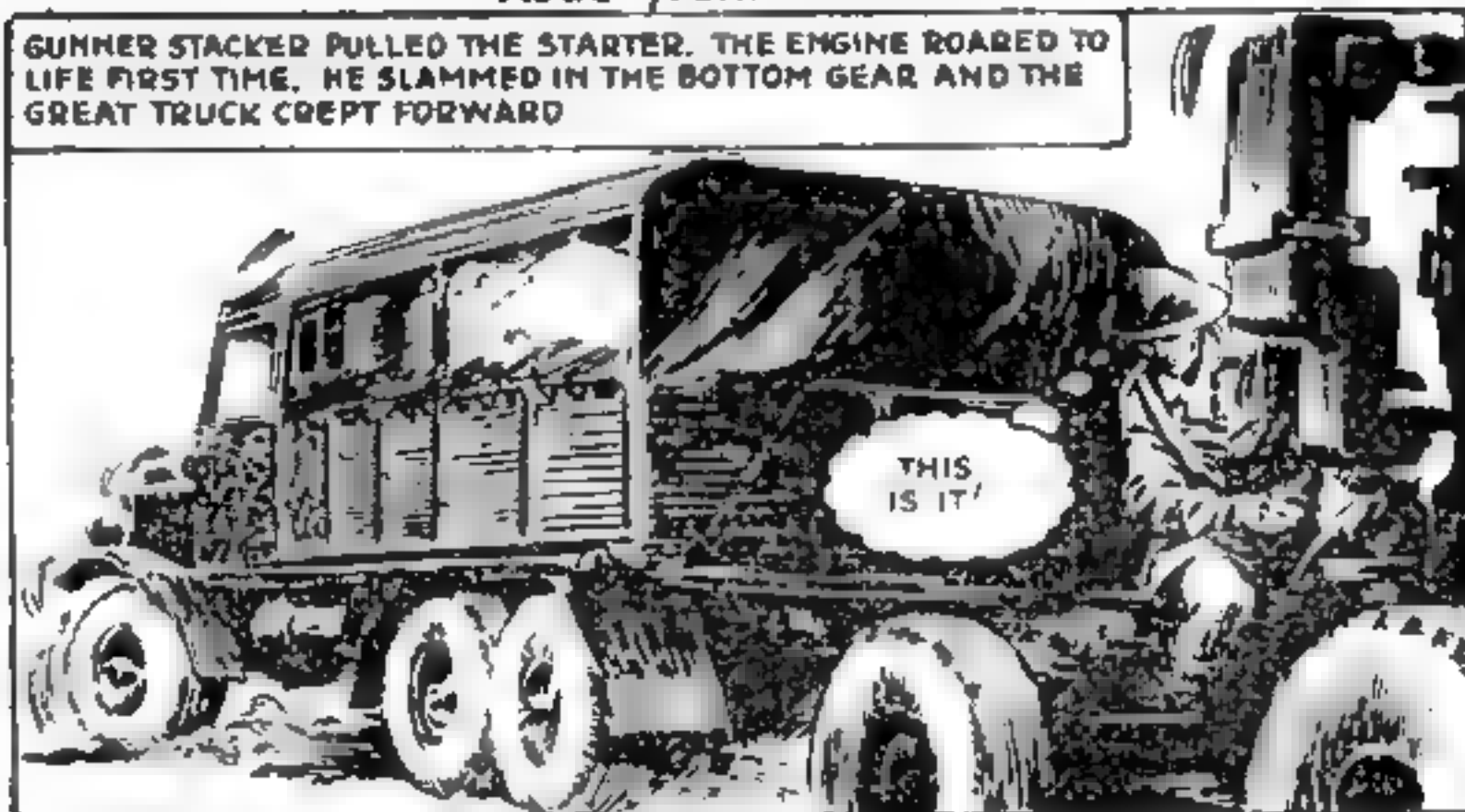
START UP THE TRUCK
... IT'LL SWING LUCY
ROUND. I'LL DO THE
REST.

OKAY, IT'S
A CHANCE...

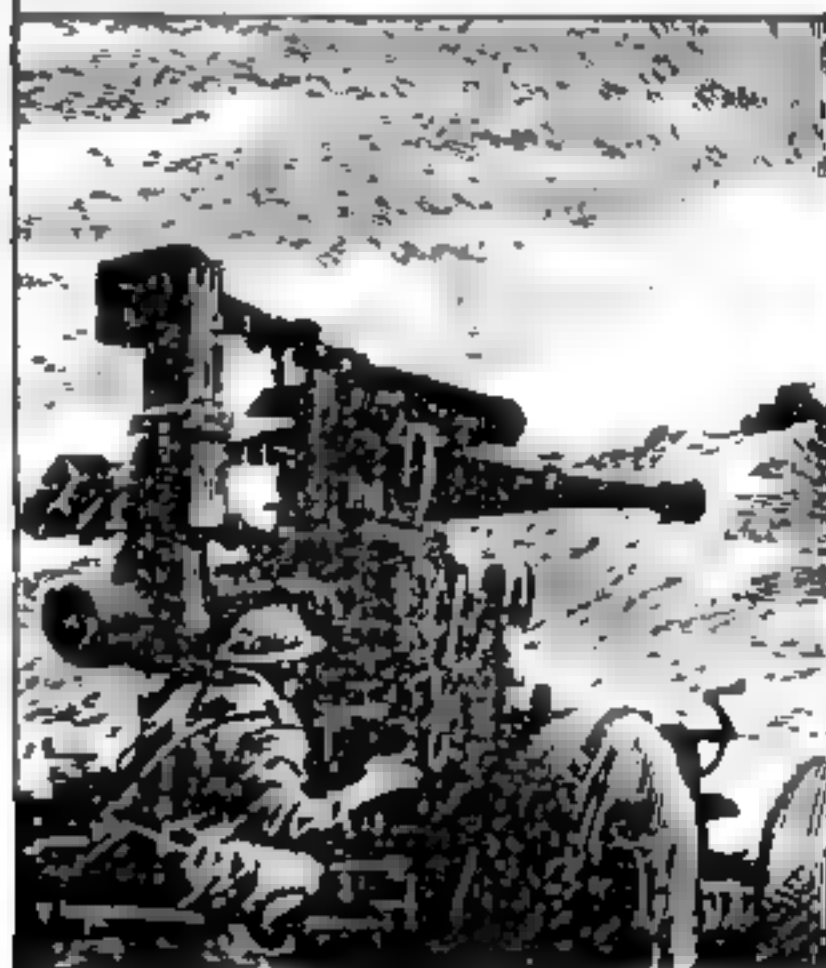
STACKER ACTED HIS PART WELL, TIREDLY, AS IF BORED WITH WAITING HE MOUNTED THE CAB. BUT THE NAZIS, TAKING NO CHANCES, GOT INTO THE SCOUT CAR . . .

IF SHE
DOESN'T START UP
FIRST GO, WE'RE
DEAD DUCKS.

GUNNER STACKER PULLED THE STARTER. THE ENGINE ROARED TO LIFE FIRST TIME. HE SLAMMED IN THE BOTTOM GEAR AND THE GREAT TRUCK CREPT FORWARD



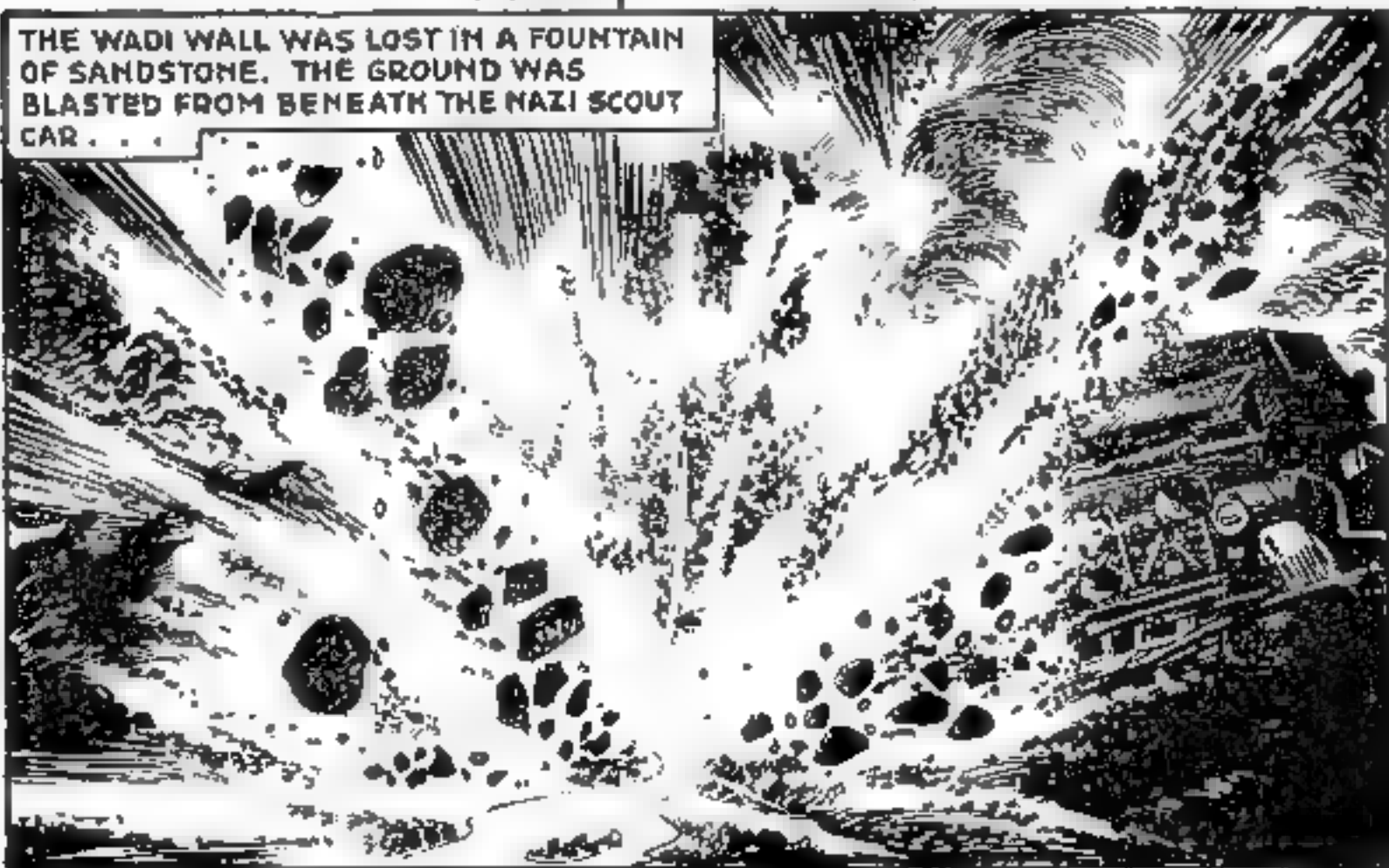
AS THE TRUCK MOVED SO THE LONG PROBING MUZZLE OF THE GUN CAME CREEPING ROUND, INCH AFTER INCH, UNTIL



THE NEXT SECOND, HEFTY BANGED AT THE FIRING LEVER. THE GUN ROARED AND ROCKED. THE BARREL SMACKED BACK ON ITS BUFFER AND THE STENCH OF CORDITE SMOTE HIS NOSTRILS . . .



THE WADI WALL WAS LOST IN A FOUNTAIN OF SANDSTONE. THE GROUND WAS BLASTED FROM BENEATH THE NAZI SCOUT CAR . . .



WITH HOWLS OF RELIEF, THE GUNNERS FLUNG THEMSELVES ON THE WRECKED VEHICLE. THEY FOUND FOOD AND LIFE-GIVING WATER,

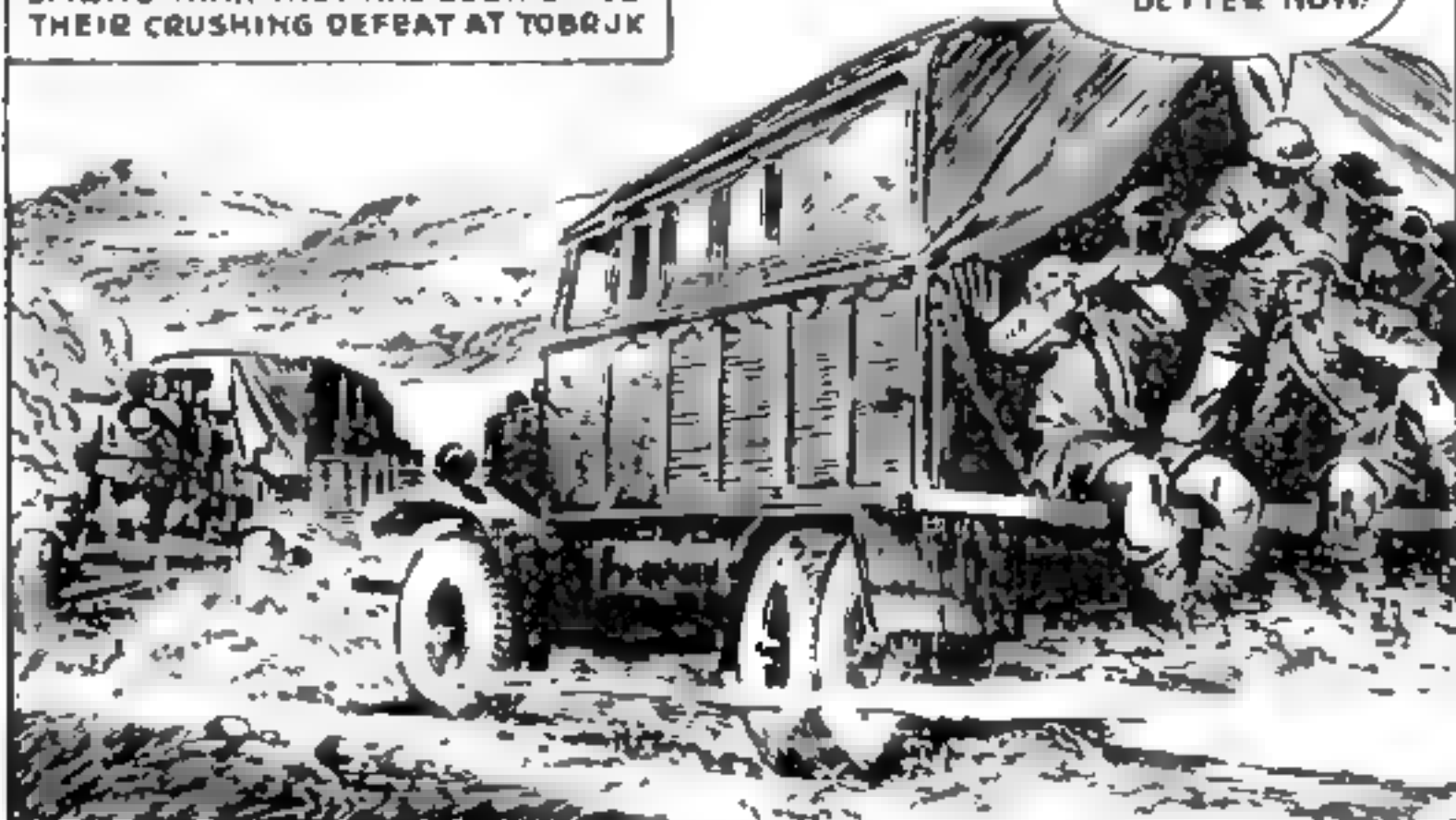
WHAT A
TURN-UP!



TALK
ABOUT
LUCK!

AT LAST THEY MOVED OFF, IN HIGHER SPIRITS THAN THEY HAD BEEN SINCE THEIR CRUSHING DEFEAT AT TOBRUK

COR! I FEEL BETTER NOW!

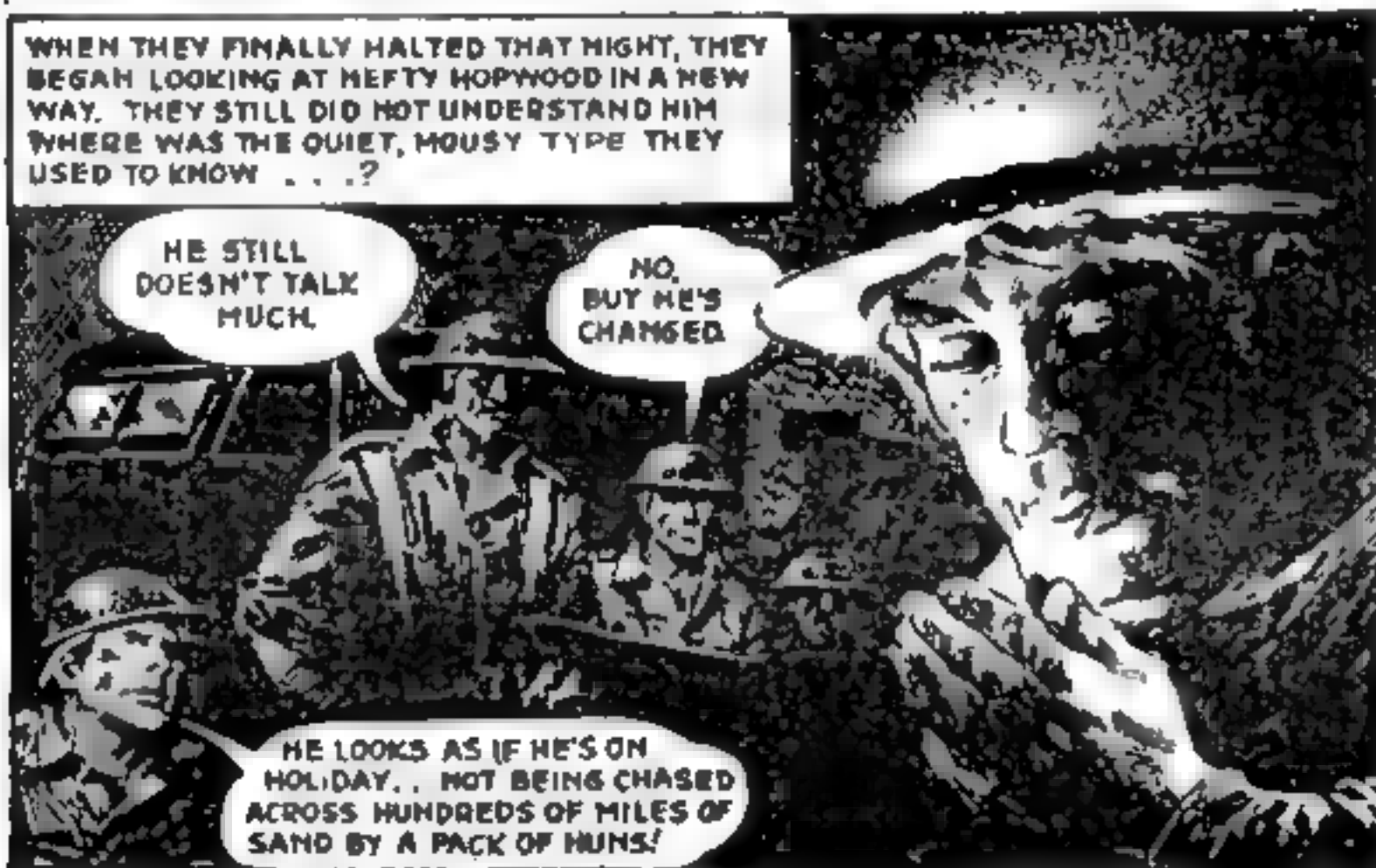


WHEN THEY FINALLY HALTED THAT NIGHT, THEY BEGAN LOOKING AT HEFTY HOPWOOD IN A NEW WAY. THEY STILL DID NOT UNDERSTAND HIM. WHERE WAS THE QUIET, MOUSY TYPE THEY USED TO KNOW . . . ?

HE STILL DOESN'T TALK MUCH.

NO, BUT HE'S CHANGED.

HE LOOKS AS IF HE'S ON HOLIDAY. . . NOT BEING CHASED ACROSS HUNDREDS OF MILES OF SAND BY A PACK OF HUNS!



FOR HEFTY HOPWOOD, THE GUN HAD BECOME EVER MORE A LIVING THING. THE THOUGHT OF ABANDONING HER TO ROT AND RUST IN THAT UNFRIENDLY DESERT WAS TOO MUCH TO STAND.



YET ANOTHER DAY DAWNED WITH A ROSE-TINTED SUN WHICH CLIMBED MERCILESSLY TO A ZENITH OF OVEN-HEAT. ONCE A FLIGHT OF GERMAN FIGHTER PLANES ROARED EASTWARD, AND BY THAT THE FUGITIVES GUESSED THE WORST



STILL AT THE WHEEL OF THE TRUCK, HEFTY HOPWOOD DROVE DOGGEDLY NORTH. LATER, HE SPOTTED A SWIRLING DARK CLOUD AHEAD. HE REACHED FOR HIS GOGGLES AND CALLED A WARNING

SANDSTORM! COVER YOUR
HEADS!



IN REPLY, HEFTY HEARD SHOUTS OF ALARM. HE STOPPED AND JUMPED DOWN FROM THE CAB... TO STAND TRANSFIXED WITH COLD HORROR LIKE THE REST OF THEM

STONE
THE CROWS!

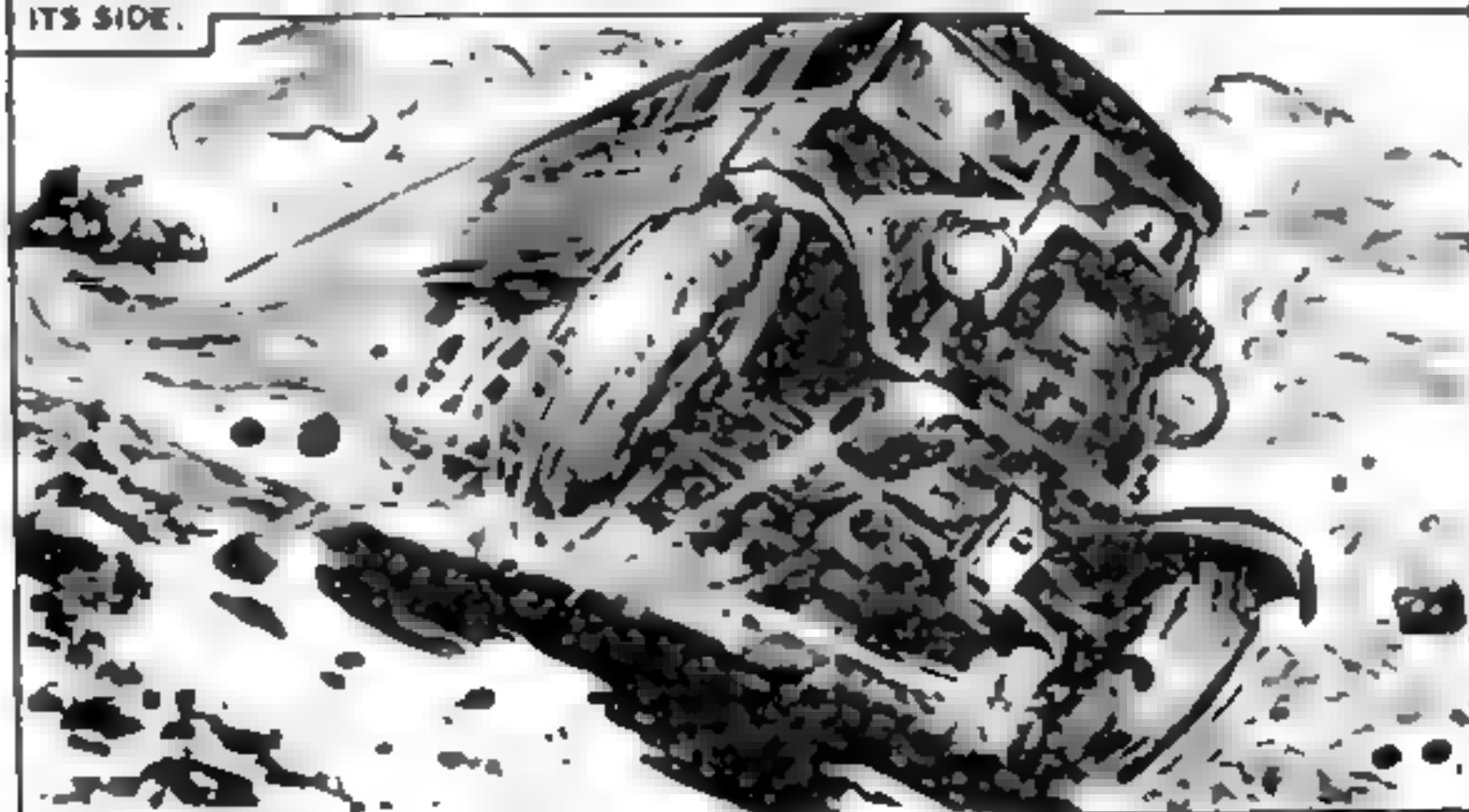


LOOK!

AS IF IN A BAD DREAM, THEY SAW THE SECOND TRUCK, LABOURING FAR BEHIND WITH PERSISTENT FUEL TROUBLE, BEING HOUNDED DOWN BY THREE ENEMY ARMoured CARS



THEY SAW THE HARRIED TRUCK LURCH AND SKID IN THE DRIVER'S FRANTIC EFFORTS TO EVADE THE PURSUIT. AT LAST IT SLEWED DOWN ON ITS SIDE AND CRASHED ON ITS SIDE.



Road from Tobruk

THE PURSUERS CLOSED IN, AND EVEN AS HEFTY AND THE OTHERS STARED WITH APPALLED AND UNBELIEVING EYES, THE ENEMY GUNS EMPTIED THEMSELVES AT THEIR FALLEN PREY.



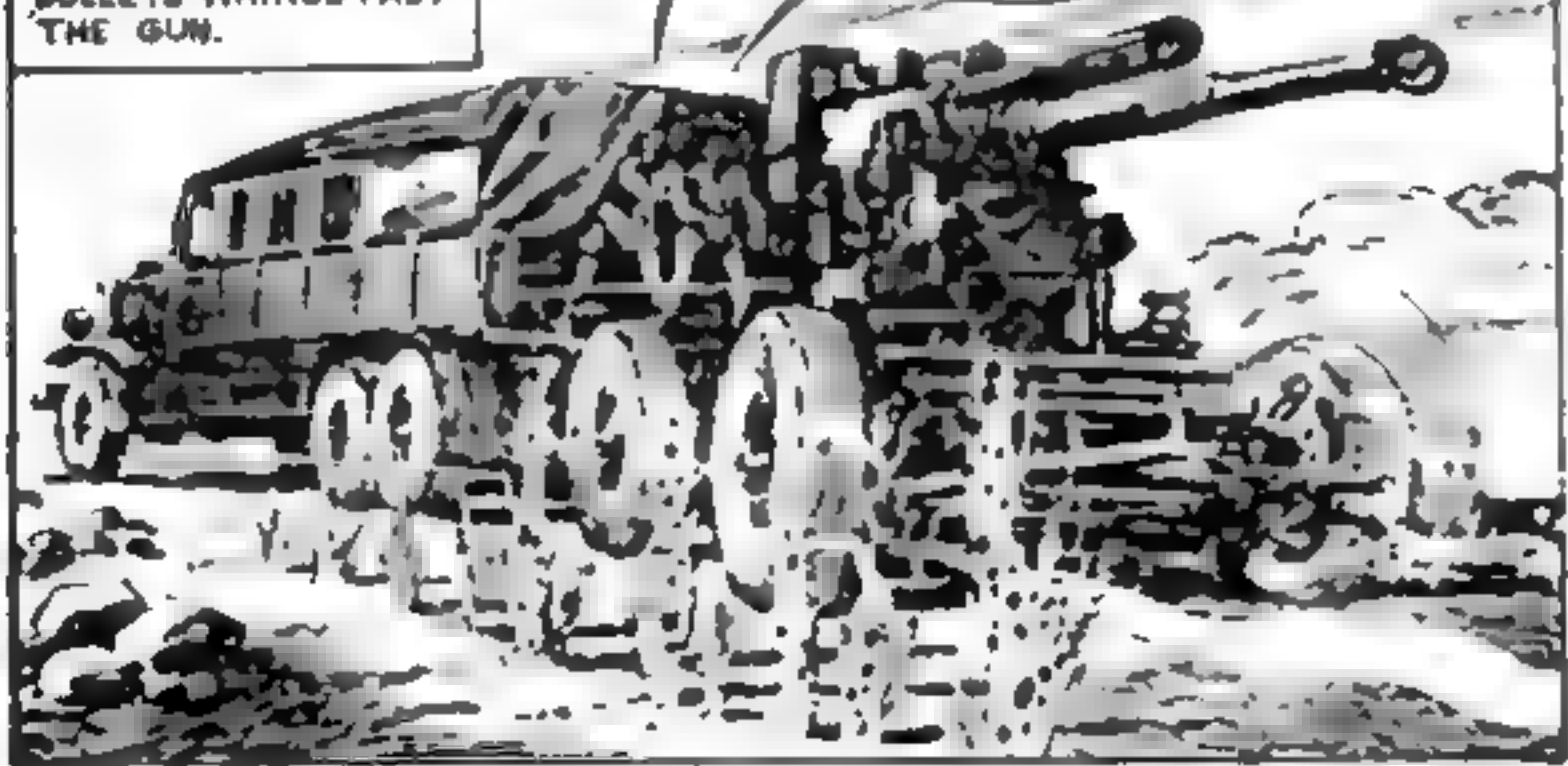
IN ONE LEAP, HEFTY WAS BACK AT THE WHEEL, CRASHING THE GEAR-LEVER INTO PLACE. FEAR-STRICKEN YELLS CAME FROM BEHIND . . .



WITH SPINE-CHILLING CERTAINTY, THE FAST ENEMY CARS CLOSED THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THEM. ALREADY, BULLETS WHINED PAST THE GUN.

CAN'T WE GO FASTER?

CURSE THIS GUN!



IT WAS THE SANDSTORM THAT SAVED THEM. NEVER BEFORE HAD THE GUNNERS BEEN THANKFUL TO BREATHE ITS STIFLING GRITTIENESS. DRIVING HALF-BLINDED HEFTY HOPWOOD KEPT ON UNTIL HIS TRAIL BODY ACHED WITH THE STRAIN.

GOTTA KEEP GOING!



THEY WERE THE ONLY TWO MEN
ABOUT THERE THAT THE OTHERS
HAD BEEN IN THE LAND

THEY WERE

THEY
WERE
THE

IT'S JUST
A BARNED
NUISANCE,
ANYWAY

BUT THESE MEN
HAD THE VERY
SAME THINGS
THEY HAD BEEN
HOLDING
THEY WERE
THEY WERE
ON THE WAY
AND THE
A
MASK OF YELLOW
DUST, WAS FIERCE
AND
DETERMINED

WE'VE GOT
TO HAVE THE
ALL THE MOST
PROBLEM IS A
FINGER ON HER!





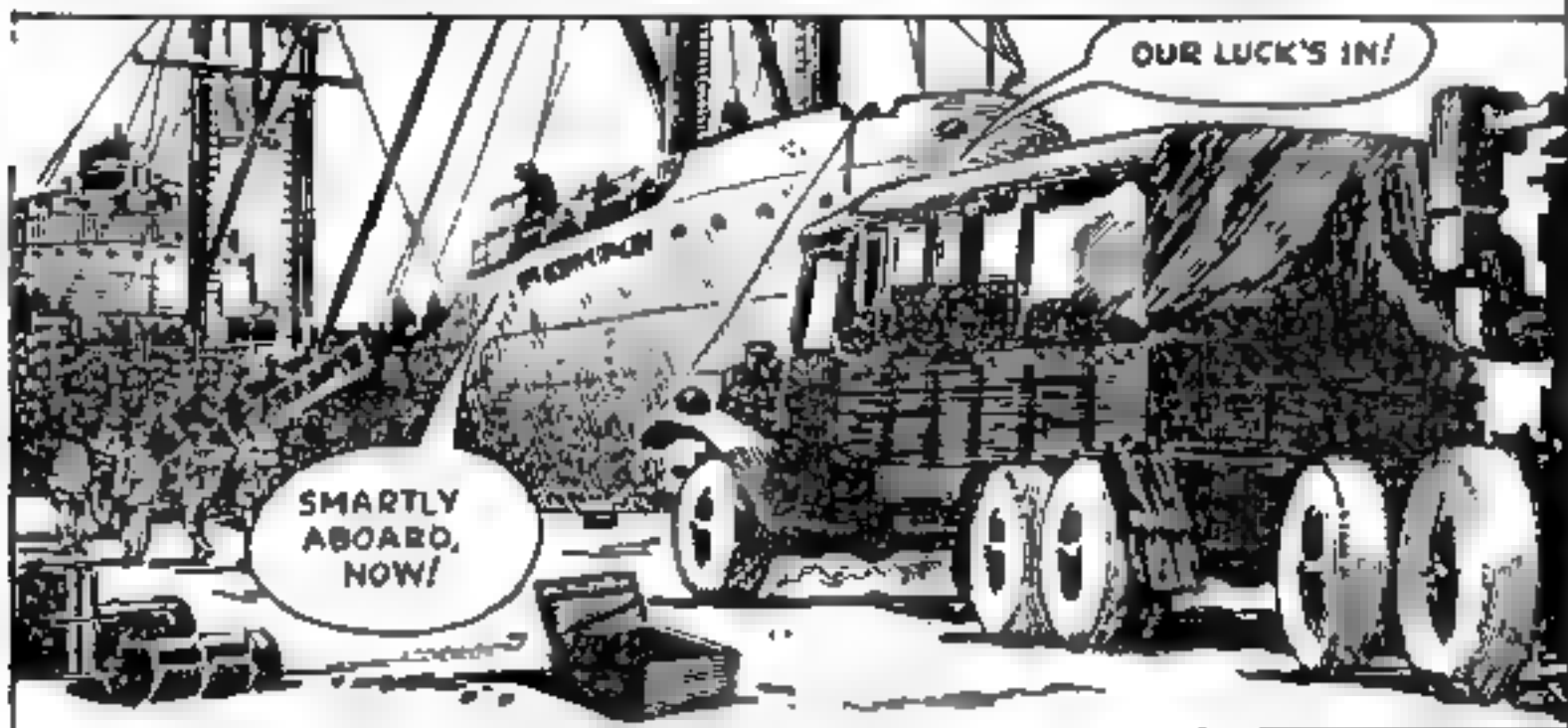
WE'LL GET SHOVELS
AND DIG HER OUT IF IT
TAKES ALL NIGHT BUT
THIS GUN'S COMING
WITH US!



HEFTY STOOD OVER THEM WHILE THEY CURSED
AFRESH AND DUG THE GUN FREE. SUDDENLY
HEFTY KNEW WHAT IT WAS TO COMMAND MEN
BUT HE DID NOT REALISE THAT IT HAD ALL
SPRUNG FROM ONE THING HIS ATTACHMENT
TO THE GUN.

Chapter 4. *Strange Destiny*

SO, FOR THE SECOND TIME AT HEFTY HOPWOOD'S INSISTENCE, THE GUN LUCY WAS REPRIEVED. AT LONG LAST THEY REACHED A SMALL HARBOUR, WHERE A BRITISH BOOM DEFENCE VESSEL WAS TAKING ABOARD BATTLE-WEARY SOLDIERS . . .



FIVE MINUTES LATER, HEFTY HOPWOOD STOOD ON THE QUAY ARGUING WITH THE CAPTAIN. BUT LIEUTENANT CHANNING SHOOK HIS HEAD . . .



EYING THAT SLENDER FIGURE DOWN ON THE QUAY, LIEUTENANT CHANNING FELT A SUDDEN SURGE OF WARMTH AND RESPECT. FINALLY HE GAVE IN . . .


ALL RIGHT, WE'LL HOIST YOUR POP-GUN ABOARD. WE'LL MOUNT IT ON THE AFTER-DECK.

THAT'S GREAT, SIR!

THE SHIP'S DECKS WERE CROWDED, AND THE CREW SAT THE GUN ON A PAIR OF BOOM DEFENCE FLOATS, HUGE STEEL WATERTIGHT BOXES . . .

LASH THE GUN SECURELY TO THE RING BOLTS.

HEFTY HOPWOOD TRIED OUT THE GUN'S MOVEMENTS AND FOUND LUCY WORKING EFFICIENTLY . . .



ALL CORRECT, SIR, AND READY FOR ACTION IF NECESSARY.

GOOD. BUT I MUST SAY SHE LOOKS A RUM SIGHT. . .

AT DARK, CHANNING PUT TO SEA AND LAID A COURSE FOR ALEXANDRIA. THE FIRST DAY WAS MERCIFULLY MIST-LADEN AND THEY REMAINED UNSEEN. BUT ON THE SECOND DAY THEIR LUCK GAVE OUT



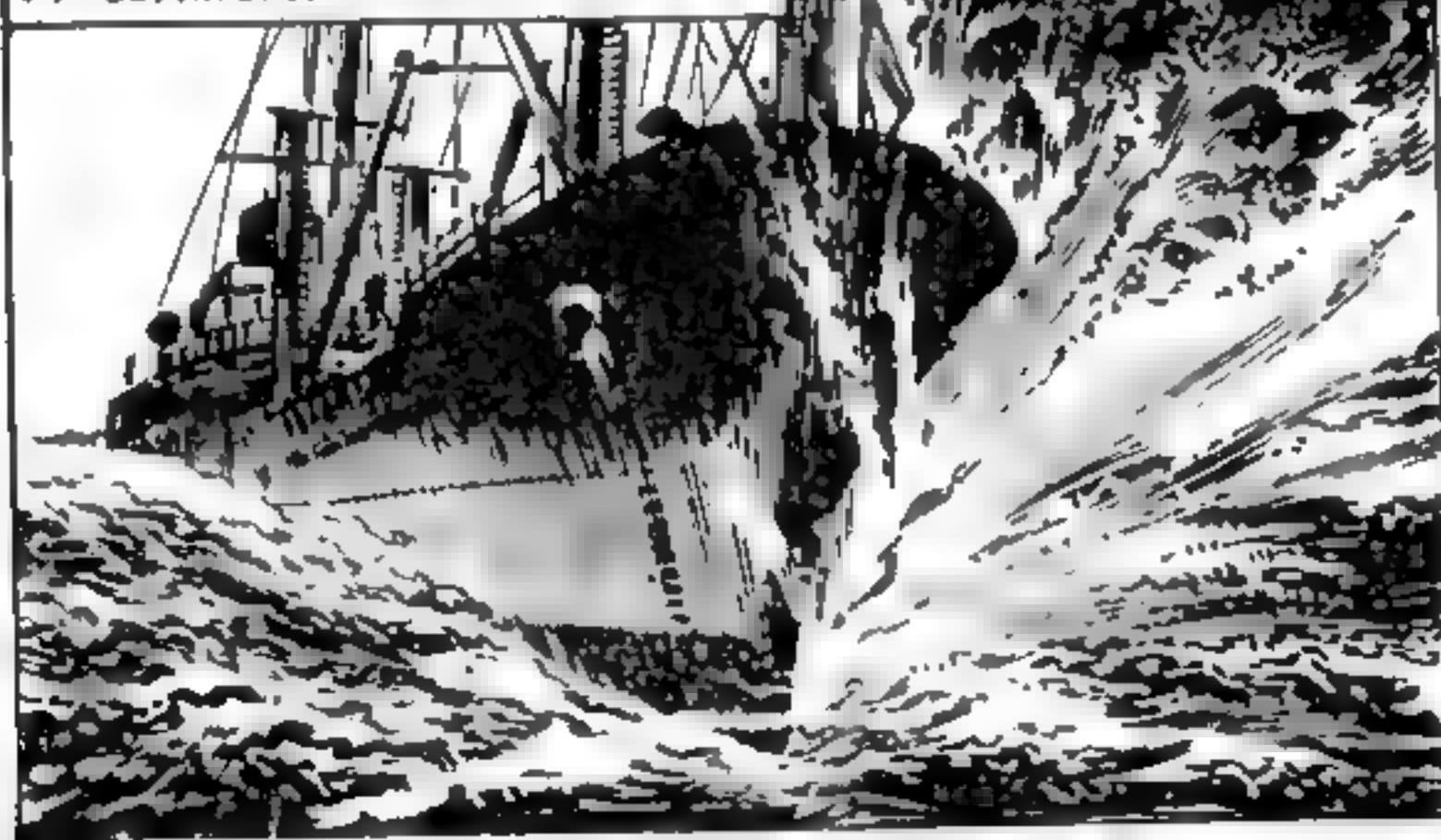
HOSTILE AIRCRAFT!

ACTION STATIONS!

THE NAZI BOMBERS CAME DIVING OUT
OF THE SUN, THEIR BOMBS SENDING UP
GREAT FOUNTAINS OF GREEN WATER.
THE SHIP'S GUNS SPAT BACK IN DEFIANCE,
AND ADDING HER DEEPER NOTE, LUCY
HURLED HER SHELLS
INTO THE SKY.



THE ENEMY BOMBERS DID NOT HIT THE SHIP
... BUT AN UNLUCKY MINE DID ...



AS THE STRICKEN VESSEL BEGAN TO SETTLE IN THE WATER, THE MEN TOOK TO THE BOATS OR DROPPED OVERBOARD TO GRAB AT ANYTHING THAT FLOATED . . .



THINKING HIMSELF THE LAST TO LEAVE, LIEUTENANT CHANNING THREW A HASTY LOOK ROUND, AND STARED . . .

GOOD GRIEF,
IT'S THAT
LITTLE GUNNER
... AND
HE'S NOT
MOVING!



WADING OVER THE SEA-WASHED DECK, CHANNING FOUND THE LONE GUNNER PLUNGED IN DEEP GLOOM

COME ALONG, HOPWOOD, YOU HEARD THE ORDER, ABANDON SHIP...

BUT HEFTY MADE NO REPLY. HOW COULD HE, IN THOSE FEW DIRE MOMENTS, EXPLAIN HIS FEELINGS ABOUT LUCY?

CHANNING ARGUED BUT IT WAS USELESS... RELUCTANTLY, HE LEFT TO CLIMB ABOARD THE LAST BOAT

THAT GUNNER MUST HAVE GONE OFF HIS ROCKER...

WE DIDN'T
COME ALL THIS
WAY FOR NOTHING,
OLD GIRL.

HEFTY COULD NOT
EXPLAIN HIMSELF
EITHER. HE ONLY KNEW
THAT, WITH LUCY HE
FELT AN UNREASONING
BUT CERTAIN SENSE
OF SAFETY.



SOMEHOW, WHEN THE SHIP SANK FROM UNDER HIM,
HEFTY WAS NOT SUPPOSED WHEN HE AND THE GUN
STAYED AFLOAT, BUOYED UP BY THE HUGE WATER-TIGHT
BOOM FLOATS.

GOOD
GIRL, LUCY,
TAKE IT
STEADY!



OTHERS IN THE WATER SOUGHT A HANDHOLD ON HEFTY'S STRANGE RAFT . . . BUT THEY SOON WENT BACK TO THEIR FLOATING DEBRIS . . .

I DON'T
TRUST THAT
CRAZY GUN.

IT'LL TIP
AND SINK ANY
SECOND.



THEN DARKNESS ENGULFED THEM ALL AND THEY DRIFTED THEIR DIFFERENT WAYS. BY MORNING HEFTY COULD SEE NOTHING ON THE SURFACE OF THE WATER AND FOR THE FIRST TIME HE FELT THE COLD FINGER OF DOUBT. . .

WHERE
ARE ALL
THE BOATS?



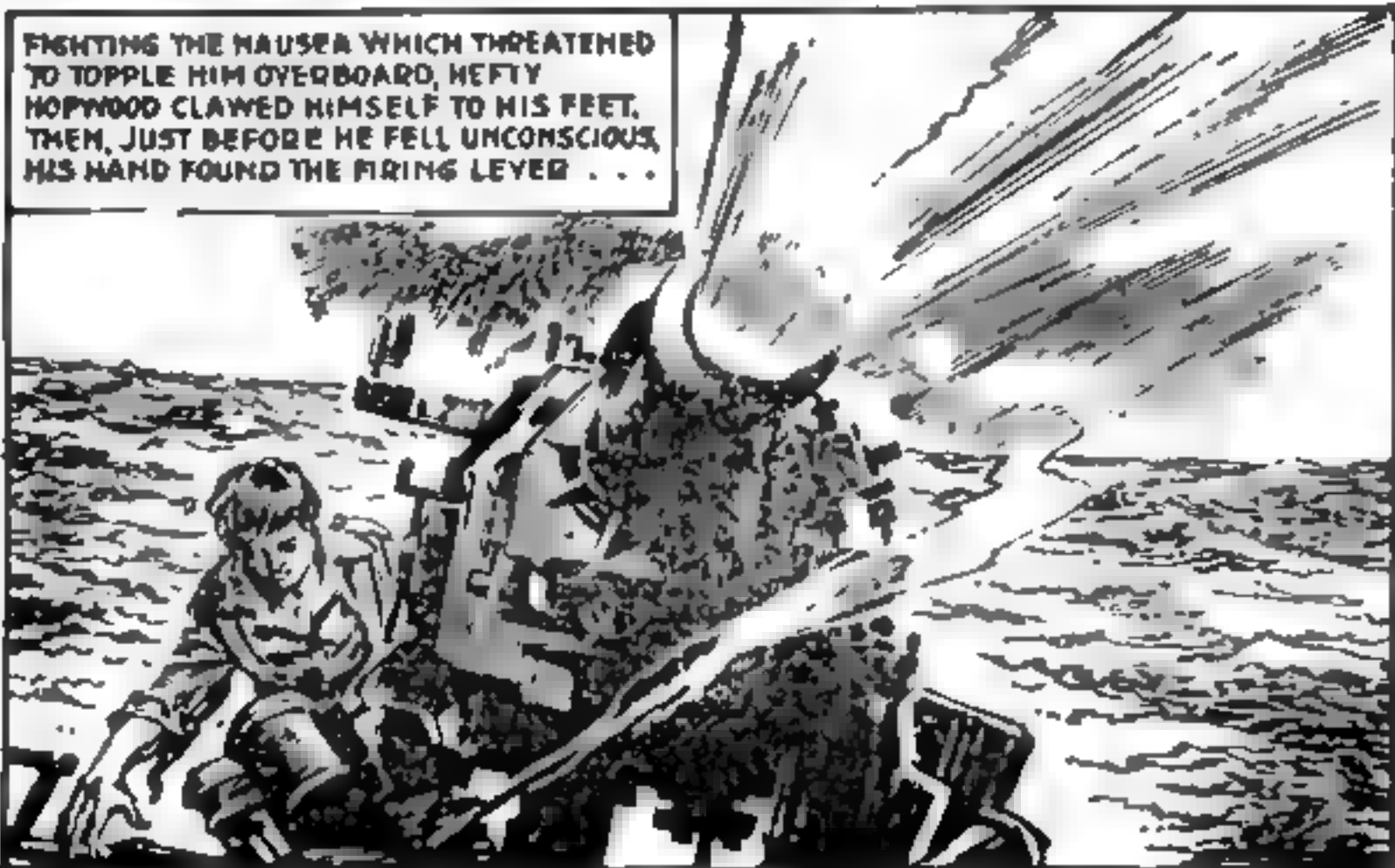
THAT NIGHT HE WAS ILL FROM EXPOSURE BY THE HEAT AFTERNOON HE WAS HEARING DELIRIUM. WOULD THERE BE NO RESCUE?



THEN FLOATING THROUGH HIS ILLUSIONS CAME THE PERSISTENT DRONE OF AN AIRCRAFT ENGINE. HIS SIGHT BLURRED, HEFTY COULD JUST MAKE OUT THE FAMILIAR BLACK CROSSES. ONE LAST VAIN HOPE CAME TO HIM . . .

A JERRY PLANE! THERE'S A ROUND LEFT IN THE BRECH . . . THERE'S A JOB LEFT FOR YOU YET, LUCY . . .

FIGHTING THE NAUSEA WHICH THREATENED TO TOPPLE HIM OVERBOARD, HEFTY HOPWOOD CLAWED HIMSELF TO HIS FEET. THEN, JUST BEFORE HE FELL UNCONSCIOUS, HIS HAND FOUND THE FIRING LEVER . . .



IT WAS THIS SINGLE SHELL, THIS LAST DESPERATE SIGNAL OF A DYING MAN, THAT SAVED A SHIP FROM CERTAIN DESTRUCTION AND MERCIFULLY CAUGHT THE EYE OF A MINESWEEPER'S LOOK-OUT...



ACK-ACK
GUN DEAD AHEAD,
SIR!

AND NOW THE SHIP WAITED, HER
RAILS LINED WITH RATINGS,
CURIOUS TO WATCH THIS
STRANGE DRAMA OF THE SEA.



THEY WATCHED AS THAT LONE, LIMP FIGURE WAS PICKED OFF THE RAFT AND LIFTED INTO THE BOAT

HE'S STILL ALIVE
... EASY NOW.



GENTLY THEY CARRIED GUNNER HOPWOOD ABOARD THE SHIP HE HAD SAVED. IT WAS THE END OF THE JOURNEY FOR A MAN WHO HAD SLOGGED AND FOUGHT HIS WAY ACROSS THE DESERT . . . TO FIND THE TRUE RESERVES OF GRIT AND DETERMINATION WHICH LAY WITHIN HIM

THE LAD SEEMS TO
BE COMING ROUND, MISTER
CLARKE. I'LL BET HE'S GOT
A TALE TO TELL . . .



. . . IT WAS THE STORY OF A MAN . . . AND OF A GUN.
AND NOW THE GUN, AS IF IT KNEW THAT ITS LAST JOB
WAS DONE, BEGAN TO SINK SLOWLY BENEATH THE
WAVES OF THE BLUE MEDITERRANEAN

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